

**Thomas Toliver**

Where: At his urban garden on the corner of Rebecca & 6<sup>th</sup> Ave. on Charleston's West Side

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Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

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Thomas Toliver, 87, at the time of the interview, is an urban gardener of the West Side of Charleston. He works in prisons as a mentor, and has taken in children of incarcerated people through his organization Family Youth in Development Service, Men and Children of Prisoners. In his urban garden, he is particularly interested in working with unhoused people. Toliver grew up working on a plantation-like estate in the Charleston neighborhood of South Hills, where his father was a gardener and chauffeur and his mother was a maid.

Toliver was interviewed by producer Aaron Henkin with Emily Hilliard as part of the *Out of the Blocks* podcast's two episodes on Charleston's West Side. Learn more: <https://wvfolklife.org/2020/01/17/out-of-the-blocks-podcast-highlights-charlestons-west-side-west-virginia-folklife-hosts-listening-party-february-12/>

TT: Thomas Toliver

AH: Aaron Henkin

EH: Emily Hilliard

Thomas Toliver Part 1

00:00

TT: My name is Thomas Toliver, I have a wife named Phyllis, which I'm blessed to have seven kids and 30 grandkids. 20 of them are girls. But I'm so pleased and thankful and blessed that every one of my children work, they all been good kids. Of course, I'm a Christian, that don't mean I take the hammer and beat the...out of everybody, I try to use their principles. And I am so grateful and so thankful all my seven kids and 30 grandkids have turned out. So for the past 30 years I have been going into the prisons. I'm trying to duplicate these people like I did my family, you know. So after 30 years in a prison, and about 15 years ago, a thought came to me: These people have children! So something has to be done. So, through a lot of meditation and prayer, and I came up with this, I came up--established an organization called Family Youth in Development Service, Men and Children of Prisoners. And this is how the gardens really began.

One day, my wife and I had them over to dinner, the kids of prisoners, about four of them. And casually she asked one of the children, you know where these green beans came from? And there were other people there. And they said Kroger's and everybody laughed but us. I felt that was very pitiful to know that we have kids that didn't know how food was produced that they are. So the very next day, when I began to look for land that I could start a garden. So the very next day, I started a process, I found a piece of property that I showed you, as we were coming in on the corner of Sixth Avenue and Patrick Street. I started and, you know, I appreciate being ignorant, everybody helps me. So I just didn't know where to start from. So I thought about-- I could build my own beds, it would be very simple and no money. So I asked around about beds, I wanted a 4X8 bed. And by asking, I don't know anything about math, carpentry, but I begin to ask. So I came up with making beds. I would buy a two by eight by 10 board, three of them, split them in 2 and make a perfect 4X8 bed. Then that's where I started over on that garden I showed you. So I began to like it. And then I went to a place and I got some very good rich dirt. And that was the start off of that. So that was the beginning of my...that was the beginning of my career... started off with a community garden. But there's a lot into community garden. But after staying over there for about six years, I began to inquire about other property in the area. And this piece of property came here. I don't know how--it's quite a few acres, I don't know how many it is. So Charleston Urban Renewal let me have this property here. And so in the progression of time, is that this is where I'm at right now. But I know you won't be able to see these, but I like to show you these pictures to show some of the results of...of my garden. The first case I had was...

03:13

AH: Do you have a... if you have to take a call or get a text or anything...

TT: No, no, this is more important.

AH: Oh, okay. Is there a way to put that on?

TT: Yes I will, I'll put it on hush. Okay, there it is.

AH: Cool. So, so you have a photo album here, you want to share?

TT: Yes. The reason I want to show it to you because it's very important. The very first case that I had I told you that organization to Men or Children or Prisoners, and the very first case I had, it was the scariest thing I ever heard of. I've been in the military, I've been all over the world. But this lady, this family that I ran into, I thought she was just a young girl and I talked to everybody. Well, we begin to establish-- I told her what I do. She said, would you help me? I said I'd be glad to help you. She says, my husband's in federal prison. I said husband? And this young lady ended up with four children. So I began to... these are the kids I told you didn't know about gardening. So I began to work with this one family. And I ain't even going to mention this organization, but I was more scared of them than ISIS, Klan, anything when I began to look into it. So I didn't know--after working with this lady for about five years. And I wonder why she kept moving--the Feds were after her and they picked her up and they took-- picked her up and was gonna send her right to Atlanta for a trial and I plead and begged and stretched and begged them to let them let her have these children to get things in order. It took a lot of praying and begging for the judge. So she let her stay out a year but she was definitely headed to prison. So here we got, now we got a lady, four children. Her husband's already in prison. Now at this point that we begin at it is that she's in a-- they pick her up after a year. They send her to Alderson. She married another guy which was real nice fella, his name. He began, he took them in his house, but my wife basically and I had to really look after them. We had a girl. Real nice, pretty girl, I'll show you her, and three boys I got to deal with. So this is where we got to start with I can show you these pictures. Here they are, the young kids that I took over.

05:22

05:22 Here's this lady right here in Alderson prison with all her four kids. All these. And here they are right here in a federal prison. So I take them up months a month to meet her while she's in prison. I'll show you this lady. Here they are in...they've been to grow up now. And now. Okay. The reason I'm gonna cut this to the chase is because the end of this, this story of this one particular family turned out real good. And now, this lady had 10 years in prison, and a lawyer who was representing her, we begged him to let her out. So in six years, she got out. And she had a struggle, getting out, getting a job. So we, still working in crime with the system to get her a job. They get her a job. After she gets out...here are the children now they are grown. There's a little story about them. And this little girl here, her daughter who's in college, she made this statement: Inmates have kids and family. It affects them too. Talk about people incarcerated? So she's at WVU. He was at Marsh... He was at WVU. He's at Marshall now. Fine kid. I mean, I'm telling you, they all turned out to be real good kids. I mean, excellent kids. And here he is now. And I told him, I'd still knock the devil out of you if you become a fool, but they turned out. And so that just inspired me not to give up. This family turned.... I mean, you talk about adverse circumstances that these kids came through, but look how happy they are now. Here they are now on a gard... This is them on this new garden, and we explain to them what that little bug was. That, that's on this garden right here! This that's why I say this story is so great. But this family, in fact, I ended up... there she is. She looks like a kid but she's not. But she ended up we got her good job. She's in Morgantown now. Her job got so good, she learned beautician in prison, now she has a beauty shop in Morgantown. I mean, she is a lady you ought to interview too at one time. Okay, that that's just a brief synopsis of the first that what I do is Men and Children of Prisoners. Okay, so now let me switch gears on you. 7:45 When I moved up here on this garden here, it really is sort of a progression of things, children. Now, it was so many street and homeless people come up here, I said, whoa, I'm gonna have to extend this thing a little bit. So from from children of prisoners, now I'm getting deep involved with homeless people, street people. And I'm dealing with

some people out of recovery. People who have been on drugs, here they are, they big picked a bunch of food off the garden. I took that to them. By the way I should have showed you that was the original farm right there that I showed you. But back here to these people here is that I pick up the food now that I grow when they help me, I take it to recovery. Now what I was telling you was very easy to see--see the see these beds along here? These beds here? Those are four by 12 beds. These are what you call container gardens. Okay, the the the four by eight beds is a cutoff point from there. From there over to that what they call a high-tunnel is West Virginia State. Now I do not want them--We collaborate, we work together. But I have to be careful. I don't want to mix mine with theirs because they probably wouldn't be interested in some... You stay here long enough. You'll see they'll show up. They're probably not interested in the people that I work with. So I keep it totally separate. What I'm begging for right now is to get me a fence in here so I can control it. The street people come in, and homeless and sometimes they lay in the needles. To avoid getting any animosity to them, I let them do that. But what I want to do is get it under control.

9:35

It's worked real good. Not only, not only have I worked with this family, they turned out good. But there are several people in recovery that I've dealt with. And my... I told you the whole thing behind this I'm so thankful the way I turned out that in my family, now what I try to do...what I done with my family, can I do this with the neighbor, with the homeless and street people? Can I do that with them? It's worked out some well and some... So at this point right now I'm trying to fence my place in not to keep them out, well, you have to keep the deer out. But I don't want them to feel like that. I'm going to tell them that I'm keeping the deer out, but I want them out so I can control my place. It's a lot of people come in, sometimes I don't come in. And, you know, being an old, not a gangster or whatever. But being around people, I've learned something. This group of people right here. These people right here, was a bunch of them. I just had to cut this short. But these people right here was a bunch of them-- they in recovery. So when they came up to help me to do my farming, my sowing and growing and watering, it got hot. So I made them sit down in a circle, and I just shut up and listened to them. And as I began to listen to 'em, I said, well, maybe we can work with people like we do a computer, let them talk... They write me-- reboot themselves! And that happened! I watched that one little girl talk to herself. She is in recovery, she kept talking, we shut up. I said now [that] you realize your problem, you can work through it! And you know, so I learned something-- just shut up and listen to people and let them know you have an ear, there's a possibility. 11:21

They can act like... they can reboot, you know, begin to think in the stories that they shared among each other. Boy, it was just a glorious time, when they came up and worked with me with a lot of street people, but what I do is just just listen to them. And listen and listen. And when they think they got an ear, you'll reveal a whole lot more things that you'll get without preaching and beating on 'em. Just listen, you know, one fella, what caused you to get here? How can you? How can I help you to get out of where you are? And on and on it goes. So where I'm at right now is I told you from community garden to an urban farm. Now West Virginia State's going to do some great work over here. They're going to bring people in, kids and train them how to grow food, how to harvest it. That's one of the greatest things in Charleston. It's called a high-tunnel. This side right here is totally separate, because our control with the police has been very good. I got their ear. And so if I really have problems, which I haven't, I asked the police. If it gets out of hand, there have been a few needles. I haven't been in it since... there haven't been any this year, which has been very good. And so, Oh I'll tell ya what the police told me too, and I didn't realize this. 12:36

This area was heavily infested with drugs. I don't know if you can see that or not. The police told me in a meeting that, and this happened here, say this is heavily invested in drugs? Well, when something good comes in, they don't want all the good people around. So they won't call, they'll just move out. So a lot of

this area, which was drug because I'm here and West Virginia State's here, you know--and they don't harm us or nothing-- they don't want to collaborate, you know, the good... and so they move out. In one area I was in where I showed you I began, the house next door prior to me getting there, there had been murders there, the police was there. And when I came out, when I established my first garden, they moved out. And that's what I learned. When you put in that good, they don't want to stay, they'll move out. And they'll give you very little bit of you know, problems. But I would like to say where I'm at right now...I feel like I'm bragging, but I've had-- my mouth has carried me all over the world. I've been in Africa--Lagos, Nigeria, Kenya, Africa, people taking me there. I've been to Giessen, Dachau, Berlin. I've been there, people visiting I've been in Oslo way. I've been in Toronto, Canada, on and on. But then when I come back to America, and see these people on bicycles and backpack, it's something wrong this picture! And seems like not too many people are talking about it. Or they have a great concern. Yeah, there are drugs and everything else. But if you'll stay here long enough, you'll get a glimpse of what I'm talking about. People, I don't know if they loss sensitivity about how important is the work, but they on bikes and backpacks. And most the time in the backpack bag, guys, I see something they've taken somewhere. And so my big thing is what I was telling you early, if I go to court, all I say is that I'm trying to duplicate my family in the streets and with the homeless. If they, if I bet, I went to court several times and I told them-- the judge-- if this person will turn out good as one of my, as one of my, one of my bad kids or grandkids, I'll feel a great accomplishment. And I think that you know, this old cliché "we live in the best country of the world?" We ought to be thankful with your sin and do something about it. Get out here and find out why these people are here. And like I said, I'm so thankful the way my family's turned out.

I'm running into a little dilemma right now. This kid right here that I showed you--He's a grown kid now. Nicest kid, you'd want to meet for what he came through. He went to the WVU had a little problem. He was playing for Marshall. And but what happened about a year ago, he pulled in a school, the police stopped him, and police said they smelled marijuana. So they just was talking to him and in the casual conversation, he told them he had a gun. And so he said it was under the seat. Well, if he would have had it as we went to court, if he would have had it out on the seat, it wouldn't be considered a concealed weapon. So we went to court about it. His lawyer and the prosecutor. So we went through the little process. Of course, the prosecutor's familiar with what I'm doing, and now most of them try to help me. Well, the prosecutor had a little trial with him and told him that if he would not, if he'd stay out of trouble for a year, they would drop the case. Well, we thought it was dropped. My lawyer called me three weeks ago and told me, the judge picked it back up, you know, and I don't know who I'm going to get to, but I got to work... The worst thing in the world a person can have, even with the amount of crime, either get that record expunged or erased, because you do know in this state, I don't know about... But if you got a record, you can't go nowhere, you can't get no job. I've been through that once. Well, this is what's happening to this kid. And right now I'm waiting to meet with the judge to tell him what a fine boy this kid turned out. He admitted he had the gun. And of course, I'm not gonna worry anybody who's in crime. But this is a bad record. I don't know if it carries across the country or not, you know, not being to get a record expunged or, or get it erased. This is where I'm at right now. Oh, one other thing. I'm so thankful I got very, got a lot of people going to come in here next year. and help me to grow my garden. There is my truck. I got my equipment in there and that's my barn. 17:19 You are going to...

AH: You said a lot there! Mr. Toliver. Look at that! I don't think.... I asked you one question. You've been talking for 18 minutes!

TT: I know, that's why I shut up.

AH: Here's what (clears throat). Well, you've given me a lot to sort of, to unpack one, one thing at a time. I kind of want to pick apart...

TT: That's why I told you to you'd have to audit it, break it down. I know I gave you a smorgasbord of stuff.

AH: You did! So let me ask you a couple of follow up questions that will kind of zoom in on some different parts of your story and just sort of...there's the... there's the entire gardening part of your story that I want to get to with you more in just a few minutes. But first, let me have you rewind, and just sort of tell the beginning of the story of how you got involved with working with people who were incarcerated? Like just from the beginning, like how'd you get interested in doing that?

TT: Well, well, actually, I've been going into prisons, about 30 years. Other people may go to preach, I go to mentor. And so as I mentor the men, I was telling you, that thought came to these people and men and women, they got children on the outside. And who's gonna take care of them? You know, who's going to treat them like a parent, somebody might take them? So that's actually how it started with working with men and women in prison. And then I began to realize they had children. What can I do? So the simplest thing I thought I could do after I learned, after I found out they did not know how food came is to start a garden! It's very simple. So but as I was telling you in the progress, this is where I progressed from, from a community garden to an urban farm.

AH: So okay, so I'm gonna pause you there. Go back even further and just explain to me like, what first got you interested in? Did you? Was it someone that you knew who went to prison or how... I mean, how is it that you found your way to the prison system as a mentor?

TT: Well, you might, if you really want to go wayyyy back, which I didn't, I came up in South Hills. It was a very elite place. And my daddy, he only knew two words: GW. It wasn't George Washington, it was God and work. As a boy, about 13 or 14, I passed newspapers, I plowed with a horse. Most Black people in that area was farmers because they had to live off the land. So that is really the beginning of my knowledge of growing food for my, you know, for the way I came up. And so in the progression of time, I never thought I would get back into it. After entering college and the military and coming back and working in community, I never didn't think I'd be doing this.

20:05 Actually, if...I tried community garden, but there's a lot of technical things in a community garden. If you'd want to see a community garden, a good example is one, the 13th Street Garden in Washington, DC. It's where the community comes together. And everybody buys a plot. But I felt like it was too much to do. So I just wanted to garden, it's a good place--the camaraderie of people.

AH: Now, the garden, TT: The garden...

20:35

AH: The event, it sounds like that really inspired you to go out and like make a garden bed and get the soil, was that dinner with those kids? So let me, let me just to get the chronology clear. So, again, the point--just sort of explain maybe the first time when you went to a prison, why? I mean, how did you hear about the idea that you could be a mentor in prisons? What was it like the first day you showed up?

TT: Well, let me see more than 30 years...A church I went into, they started to prison, when they left, I kept going. In fact, I'm still going I go every first Tuesday of every month. And to hear the stories, how men cry about to children, you know, and, you know, it's a shame, they wait till they get to prison to realize, look, I got children back there, who's gonna take care of them? Who's going to take care of them like I would take care of them? So it's kind of hard to communicate that to them because of the restrictions. But I let them know, if you tell me who they are and where they are, that's the only way I can deal with here, I'll follow up with them. 21:40 AH: So you were going about your life after your military service. And as part of your church group, you heard about this mentoring program where you will go to prisons and work with guys...

TT: Actually, actually it started it started-- It wasn't a really a mentoring group, it was preachers going...and people have heard enough preaching. They want some examples. And so I tried by example, to mentor people and be very honest with them. I haven't always been a good guy on on I go, and I don't brag about my past. But I'll tell them that if you can make it, I know--- if I have made it, I know you can. That's what I tell the prisoners. But you'd be amazed that the prisoners who are concerned about their children. And you know what I try to tell them and encourage them, the best thing you can do when you get out, you be a mentor to them, and tell them that you don't want to come to this place. And it's the first thing, especially a lot of prisoners who have children, that's one of their major concerns.

22:37 AH: Along the way, you met a mom and her four kids, and the dad was in prison.

TT: Right. Right. I don't even want to name the group that he was connected to, but it was-- you've probably heard of it. But it was the worse organization I had ever heard of. And it was a very dangerous organization. And something she was in that, I don't know what part she played in it. But it must have been a divine intervention. What happened, I go and you see, I know everybody. Well, what happened the way I met her is, I finished West Virginia State and I was down there on some business and she was in this little cafeteria. My wife now allows me to look at the menu, I just can't order nothing off of it. So I started talking to this--I thought she was a young, a little young girl. You see here? She is right here. She looks young, but she's not. And I started this conversation with her and I started this and I had just started--It's called Family, Youth and Development Service: Men and Children of Prisoners. I had just started about, and then that's when she asked me to help her. 23:40 AH: Her husband was in prison for criminal gang activity.

TT: Right, right.

AH: She had these four kids, you invited them over to your house for dinner? TT: Well, this is after I began to establish camaraderie with her. What she didn't tell me--maybe she's too, but I used to have an office there on the [Kanawha] Boulevard and I had a call one day and she comes to this [unintelligible] The Feds are after me. I said don't play with me, it's too early. I said hung up on the Feds, call me back. So this girl was going to prison. So we had a little court, on on and what, but anyway, they spared her for a year to get her business right. And they gave her 12 or, 12 years in after much crying and going on she



got out and she's doing extremely well. And this little girl here. She's a junior now at WVU she's gonna finish and he's at Marshall. AH: So...

TT: All this came out of the garden. 24:34

AH: So the mom ended up getting put away as well for her involvement in whatever auxiliary way.

TT: Right, I'm left with 4 kids. Here they are. She's in Alderson prison. AH: So when the feds locked up the mom, you took it upon yourself to bring these four kids into your own home?

TT: Actually, she had married a man who had a house, but he worked all the time. Good, excellent guy. So in collab...We made sure that, you know, if they didn't have food, if they had to be tended in school, I'd go to school and look after them, whatever they need as a parent, my wife and I would fulfill that. Course, the hers, her...their stepdad was a good guy too. But he probably hadn't been used to children like we were cause we had so many. It really worked out real, real good for them. But if you know what these kids came through... They're miracle children! Can you imagine a mother and father in prison and nobody? So I feel so blessed that I was able to help them. Well he's a grown...he's a grown man now. And he'll be playing for Marshall. 25:41 AH: Those kids inspired you that to create a garden!

TT: Right. By me collaborating with them and having a success story, it just inspired me to keep going. You know, this, it was a progression from Men and Children of Prisoners to an urban farm. Now I can do both. I can mentor children of prisoners, I can collaborate with the street and homeless people. AH: You had seven kids of your own and 30 grandkids.

TT: Right. And they're all doing well!

AH: And then you brought these four other kids into the fold of your family too.

TT: I'll tell you what, if you get to know me, you'll find I'm a little crazy, so don't tell her [Emily Hilliard] she has to be here all the time. But I had a son to go to prison twice, jail in Texas I went down. I says son, I'll make a deal with you. If you go one more time, I'll pay that they keep you. I said, you know your dad's crazy. I will pay for them to keep you in prison. He knows I was crazy, he knew I would do it. He got his act... In fact, I have a step two... My only two kids that went to prison was my step-son, and my biological son. You know what they are now? Guards in prison. And they make excellent because they've been there and they're able to tell the story, how I treated them. And so like I told you, I am so thankful the way all my kids turned out. So once again, if I can work with kids and adult, just to make them like my family, I'd be happy! But I know you want to talk about the garden. But I can't talk about the garden without collaborate, without talking about the people that I work with. 27:24

AH: So you sat down at your dinner table with these four kids one night.

TT: Right, right.

AH: You served them green beans, tell me tell me...

TT: Well, that it was really three, we had green beans, potatoes, and chicken--our favorite. And so casually, I don't know if my wife is... she said you know where these green beans came from? And they was very serious, they said Kroger's. They are not the only kids that's given me [those] answers. Since that time, they've been other people educating children about agriculture, you know, but that particular instance there just, just blew my mind because I came up, you know, off of a garden. And so that, that, that, that that so I took this family and made them an example. And like I said, I'm so thankful the way these kids are doing-- that encouraged me never to give up on 'em. 28:15 AH: So you started with a little garden plot, you made a couple of garden beds, and then that's grown into

TT: This urban farm. And here it is, there it is right there. It's these four by eight beds, loaded with dirt. That's the area over there where I showed you. Like I said, it's a little cold, but I'm amazed somebody didn't see us up there and come up and collaborate with us. But you know, I've had excellent help. I can't... My big thing right now I'm praying and begging to fence in to keep out the deer but the people too, but I don't want them to know that. I don't want to establish bad relations. So I'm used to... I really need... The deer really ate up my place last year. 29:01 AH: Tell me more about what it was like for those kids to participate with you in creating that garden. TT: Well, I tell you what, a lot of funny things to do. I had to go to school and get them, take them to the doc and everything. And they was really acting up in the car and one of the kids said "Stop, Roger, you know, he's old! You know, they were just funny kids and they was a little problem for a while, but in the progression of time when they saw they had my interest, they they turned out to be good kids. And it was rough, but I enjoyed it. I mean, I see the results of investing and I'm seeing where they are now. I still keep up with them. 29:49 AH: What was it like to work in the garden with them?

TT: Oh, they found it fascinating. This is her. When she's grown, she's come back. We picked this bug off a plant. And this, this is this is...they was at this stage here. See how small they are?

AH: These kids look like they were in about middle school when you had them.

TT: Well, let's see. I think it was in about the third or fourth grade. Yeah, but just hung in there with them. But there they are with their mother at Alderson prison. And they all doin good. AH: They're all grown now.

TT: Yeah, all grown, Yeah. I told this one here, maybe I shouldn't say it on radio. I told him I'll still knock the H out of you. (laughs) But I'm so amazed that you know, they could have easily fell in with the wrong crowd of children, the wrong adults, had 'em on drugs...I know that you know and I'm so thankful. And I'm 86 and I'm gonna do this until I croak over, because I am so thankful the way my kids turned. And as I shared with you, if I go to court, I tell 'em, if they'll turn out as good as my worst kid, I'll feel a great accomplishment. But like I was telling you earlier, I know I talked so much you're really gonna have to... but what I was telling you it from from the garden, from the community garden, this is a progression of it. And this is where I've settled, from a community garden to an urban farm. Now the the community

garden was sort of exclusive. You know, I had certain people but here, this is inclusive. Anybody wants to come in and join with me they can.

31:30

AH: And the people who come here are just people from around the neighborhood, they're people from drug recovery groups, homeless people,

TT: Right, right. And some of them, a lot of 'em don't want money. Sometimes I've dealt with people they just want somebody to sit down and collaborate with--that's what I do. You know, my big thing though with my farm, you know what I sorta made my motto with people who don't work is "sow, grow, and eat" you know? Sow your food, grow it and eat! You know? And maybe you won't have to go to the welfare office--I have no problem with that--the only thing I said none of my family, none of them had to go but if we can just encourage people to do that. And like I said, this farming, it can be fun and to watch stuff grow and then eat it--it amazes a lot of children too, you know even adults! 32:26 AH: Has your life turned out the way you imagined it would?

TT: (laughs) Man, you asked me a question! It was rough for a while I will tell you. I've been through heck and high water. I was so far down one time I had to jump up to sea bottom. I was losing my house, my job, my family, my dog but things just turned out--as I became a Christian things turned around and you know like I said I can share my life with other people. And tell them that if I can do it, you can make it. I told you earlier I spent 25 years in college trying to crowd in four, but I made it! Yeah. And I'm 86, I've never been out of a job in my life. To show you how I might be a little weak in the mind, I held a job for 24 years, the first three months I couldn't spell the name of the job! (laughs) I worked for AEP (laughs)

AH: And you couldn't spell the name!

TT: I couldn't spell the name of the job I had, but that's all right. I made it! The dilemma I'm in right now though. No, it's not a dilemma. I'm gonna fight for this kid. I told you that he is caught with a gun, well the kid's--he was one of the main kids that work with me in my garden--is that everybody's showing me favor and I just hope-- I've written the judge a letter, the lawyer's with me but I've talked to several people... That's a strange law that you can't-- if you get a crime, even a minor crime and you can't get it expunged, you can't do nothing. If you have a crime and you committed it, and if you don't get it expunged, man it's heck and high water. That's where I'm at now.

AH: Let me ask you one or two more questions just about you. How do you think--how do you think this garden project has changed you as a person? 34:31 TT: It makes me as I see people come in and they developed to be good people, even people go on drugs and recover, it gives me hope that if we can collaborate with people and not cast them aside...I sorta a look at my family like, you know, like you take a picture? And in the old [days] they had to go through a development stage? That, this is a picture that I've taken, it's gonna take a lot of development to get a true picture. You know what I mean? It has to go through a development stage and, and the old method of development, you know, you had to put it through acid. Yeah. But oh, I don't know the new techniques now. But it's sort of like a picture. And I got to develop it, what it takes to develop. What does it take to develop? To make people better people? Well,

the methods that I said I'm using is gardening--to show them that you don't have to, you can...In fact, when I came up, when I came up, there wasn't no such thing as welfare--it was workfare. Everybody worked, they had to. And I guess some of that old thinking is with me, when I begin to work and deal with people in gardening.

35:46

Now, West Virginia State's gonna do a great job here with what they're doing. But it's totally different. And see, they got theirs fenced in, that's why I want my, I want mine fenced in, that's what I'm working on. It's to control the deer. And I want to be able to control the people that come in here. AH: One more question for you. I like that metaphor of a picture, developing the way, when you think about the way people change. It's also interesting to think about, I get the metaphor of a garden! I mean, talk about, talk about what you can learn about the way people grow, by the way a garden grows.

TT: Well, I tell you what it do, it will make you think about people. And you know, some kids have learned that a tomato is a fruit, you know. Okay, if you notice that a tomato rottens from the inside out? So when you deal with people, you better deal with the inside, so you can develop the outside. So if that's the case, with a tomato, then we are seeing people rotting from the inside. So let's deal with that. And then in a progression of time, maybe they'll develop better I mean, you've been around and you're seeing this. I tell what you might like-- there's a... what gave me the the the... what gave me the vision of a garden, not only with these kids who did not know, but I'd done some research and I seen a garden in DC. It was called 13th Street garden.

AH: Yeah, you mentioned that.

TT: Yeah, a way they developed that and what it did, the whole neighborhood, they collaborate and made a beautiful neighborhood. But it wouldn't work here too much because. Well, it would work but it would take a whole lot more time and take more people and take a lot of interviewing. So urban, like I told you, the community garden was exclusive, this is inclusive. Anybody who wants to come... AH: What do you think it is about you-- your personality that brings people to you? We were at, we were at your house...

TT: Yeah.

AH: You've got cats that are surrounding your house, they all like you, kids surround your house, they all like you--what's that all about?

TT: Because you know, I learned early to accept people for who they are. You know people get on this race, I tell 'em if God ain't solved it, don't ask me to do it, so just don't even bring it up to me. There's always gonna find people reason to hate you, or some--there is, it's an endless... I don't even get into that. Like I told you I don't get involved in race, religion, politics, sex, bad attitude, and their ain't nothing left. I just don't have time for it. You'd be amazed if you'd see even the kids. My wife's like just like I am. We learned to accept them all. And like I said, I can't keep the cats from--they'll see my car a block away and come and meet me.

AH: I always consider everybody that I get to meet and have these conversations with to be my teacher for the day. What do you--do you have some words of wisdom you want to leave me with about life?

TT: I don't know, you may not fully accept my beliefs but my way... A lady came out and she had, she had against no God and all that. And so I said Miss, I just want you to think of this. Everything it was made had a manual with it. Am I right? A car--automobile? Do you think a person was made without a manual to go with it? So everything I use I seen my daddy was [unintelligible] was ignorant, but he was so wise, he used biblical principles. And when he made he used that guide book all the way. Everything you want to know is in the Bible and I found out it works for me and the people I deal with. Maybe as a Christian, maybe Buddha, Mohammed--may better work for you, but I know what works for me. You know, and I've used that like I told you, I use the Bible as a guide, as a manual to get people on track, to get their abuse [unintelligible] with a God who made you, you know. So when the lady was done, I said, if you got brake trouble in your car, you go to your manual and find out what I do. I said, well, God got a Bible, if you got problems, you go in and find out what's your problem, and adjust it with what it says in the manual and it'll work. And I believe that.

AH: You're spiritual principles really seem to manifest themselves in the world, though, in good works. In the things that you do. In your actions.

TT: Right. That's what I'm saying. You do not work to become a Christian, you become a Christian and then you work. If you do works to become a Christian, that makes you God, you know, but you become a Christian to do good works. And I think a lot of young people have seen old people sorta hypocrites. They say they are Christian but then they hate Jews, they hate Black people, or they hate white people vice versa. They got so many stumbling blocks and yet they call themselves Christians. Well the young people, they are authentic. They want to see something real. And I try to present that to young and old people. You don't have to believe the way I do, I'm just telling you what works for me and has worked for me and turned out, turned out 7 kids and 30 grandkids and if you get to know me, you know I got a little clown--all my kids are like that. Real good kids and I thank God for that. And that's all, that's all I have to offer. And the people that I work with here on the garden, street people, I mean some very rough people and I just sit down and collaborate with them and let 'em blow off and some turn out good, some don't.

AH: 86 years old.

TT: Yes.

AH: You could be relaxing in an easy chair with your feet up, reading the paper, watching TV, reading books. I mean, this is, do you, this has got to be exhausting! But it's obviously worthwhile.

TT: Okay, let me tell you my new adventure. I'm out here on my garden to begin to work with people, and I question, where'd you go to school? Some of 'em go to very nice schools. One is George Washington, Capitol, the elementary school, is one of the elementary schools is Mary Snow. And I'm dealing with people up here who have been to those schools. My new adventure is oh no, I'm starting at the top, I'm going to the bottom. So now I go into one of the elementary schools as a mentor. I'm trying to pick out, where will these kids end up if we don't get 'em at the bottom. So that's where I'm at 2-3 days a

week. I go into the elementary school. Mentor. I begin to learn that the math ain't good. But it's just something different, you know? I think if we all, with good sense, if we don't control this drug culture, that's what, you know what nation's pushing 'em in here...military of this nation cannot be destroyed but it can destroy from drugs in here and who's gonna fight our wars if everybody on drugs. So that has some of my concern. But I said earlier right now, I'm doing mentoring 2-3 days a week in high school, elementary school.

43:48

AH: You give a lot to other people, what do you get out of it? What motivates you to do it?

TT: How well things turned out for me, you know. You know, a lot of my friends, I hate to say it, who went away from here had good jobs. Either they on drugs or in a nursing home. Or a lot of 'em in caskets, you know. I walk funny, I'm trying to figure out why. But I enjoy it. If it gets over a burden, I'll just take up and leave. I left this weekend during the Veteran's Day to Charlotte to visit my granddaughter. That relaxed me, it prepares me to get ready for the next event. Right now I'm collaborating with people who are trying to establish--thank goodness I got some people doing most of my garden for the next year.

44:38

AH: We've been in here for a while, I'm gonna...

TT: I hope you sure can know how to...she hasn't said anything!

AH: Well let me ask, actually, is there anything that you want to cover or if you feel like gaps in the story, you've been listening...

EH: Yeah, well one short question, you say the word "collaborate" a lot and that seems to mean something special to you--talking to people, collaborating, working with them. Could you talk about what that means?

TT: To me it means that you know the situation but you want to hear other people say it and you want them to do all the talking and you do all the listening. Then I can collaborate with 'em to see. Collaborate means you know, join together and be of one accord. And right now I'm at the point of--what got you to the streets, or what made, so what can we do to help you to get out of it? One of the major things I know, I know I'm getting off balance right now but one of the things that I'm highly concerned with, a lot of the people that I work with out here have records. They can't get drivers license. They owe child support. A lot of people! I mean I dealt with a man, he's a hard worker and I knew eventually they were gonna try to do something to accommodate that, but a lot of people--I work with a guy right now, I hope I'm answering your question is, we gotta put people back to work, that's step 1 and I'm using the garden to do that. But when I say "collaborate with" it's to let people know that I'm here for 'em, I like to talk to you, what are you thinking about, how can I help? Give you everything but money, I can give you food. So I

don't like to say to a degree, collaborate means I sort of can identify with your problems and we can talk about 'em. I'm surprised the fella hasn't showed up here already, but it's a little cold for him. But he found out that I could do that. I've helped him. A neighbor fellow here.

46:55

EH: And then before the recorder was on you started to talk about growing up gardening and the importance of that for your community and your family.

TT: I asked you if you were familiar with South Hills and you said yes. If you go up South Hills, make a left at the Fire Dept., that's Walnut, make another left, that Newton Road. It was sort of like a plantation. My daddy done the garden and the chauffeur there and my mother was sort of like the maid. It was a big place up there. And I watched, I got some of my knowledge from the people who my daddy worked for by gardening. They put highly emphasis on food, gardening. And so I really learned gardening at an early age in my life without getting technical like they are now with gardening. But I grew up, my dad grew up growing, gardening so we would have adequate food to eat.

EH: And you grow up plowing with a horse!

TT: Plowing with a horse. If some people might hear this, they might know what I'm talking about, know what whoa and gee and haw means. That's what it used to have a horse. One of the better gifts as I was coming up plowing with a horse, you may not be, but there was a tractor they call a Gravely Tractor, in fact I still got one. After my horse days, I had a tractor. I plowed with that tractor all the way through high school and I got ready to go to college. Fact I still have a Gravely Tractor. And you know, some people may have felt like if they knew, if it might have been bad--no, I enjoyed my coming up. It was a little rough passing papers at 3 and 4 o'clock in the morning, but I passed papers all over South Hills. Newspapers. As I look back, you know, it was things like that that has sustained me and helps me to help other people. Like I said, I tell people if you can, if I've made it, you can make it, without me going into too many details, so I go on that basis of people I'm dealing with, I think about what I came through and they can too. Even my military, my college experience, my street experience. So if I can make it, you can make it.

49:08

END OF TAPE

Thomas Toliver Interview Part 2

00:00

TT: Come close 'cause I don't want to talk. See the lady in that green, where the green roof is? She's a Black lady. For some reason she hated my guts, called me a Black son...and it went on and on. So one day, showing you what a good guy, I took some people, she says what do you want, I says, I got these

people here, they'll paint your house. They will? I said, it's called Enact, are you familiar? I said, these people will paint your house, and she just melted right down. So they painted her house and now she's my sweet, but I've learned early, take your enemies, make friends out of 'em. And now she's in my corner. But she hated my guts. I don't know for what reason. Called me a Black...everything you could think of, but you're right... [unintelligible] Okay, let's go over this right here.

AH: You find your way to her heart.

TT: Right, listen. This right, see these here? They're called container beds and actually I got that idea from watching 'em grow container pots? So actually they're easier to work. Right now what's going in here is winter greens, another layer, these are winter greens. I got a very fascinating story for you and tell it to you in a minute. But these beds were built by West Virginia State. What they turn over to me because I can assign people to 'em. I wish you could meet this man--I got one man working here who was a general in the Syrian army under Assad. Yeah! His name is Ishmael. Love him! Sweet man. He has 3 beds and here and he loves to come in here and work, him and his wife. And just a nice guy. But anyway. From right here, back there is mine. From there over is West Virginia State. And there's, I never head too much of this, what they call high tunnel, but you're able to control your heat in there by letting the curtains and you can grow maybe all the way up until January. The way they...so I let them fence this in, but from this bed back here, I've already got these assigned (footsteps). A lady's gonna come in, see like I said in January I'm gonna be 87. I got to know that I ain't gonna be able to do all this. But we gonna have a lady that's taking this over and I'll give her the work. Okay, what grew in here was tomatoes, corn and green beans, squash, and turnips. We've already harvested this, this right here. I wanted to keep it separate. By planting season, I hope to renew my dirt in here. Now here's more development property here. Charleston Urban Renewal by the way, let me have this. I had someone break in there [his shed] and take a generator, that's why 5 locks are on there, but...(footsteps)

02:55

Now we're hoping to develop this. See this up here? We hoping to develop that. I'm hoping someone will carry on where I started. I can't last 20 more years and I know that, so I'm just hoping that I planted an idea for the neighborhood. I'm trying to get someone to think like I'm thinking, is to work with the homeless and the street people. West Virginia State, they gonna do a fine job up there. They gonna train kids how to grow food and how to process it, but the reason I want to keep it separate, I know they don't want to deal with the people I'm dealing with. So eventually, I'm gonna cry and let somebody help me to fence a portion in.

AH: Give me a sense of the different kinds of, the range of crops that you guys grow here.

TT: You know what, I'm trying to encourage people, and I didn't do this, I mean I learned...one year I grew a sweet potato and it grew about, it was almost the size of a football and I found it so fascinating that I done a little research on it. I found out it was so high in antioxidants, you know that cancer-fighting agent that's good for men? I forgot, but there was a medical facility somewhere and I went before a board of medical organization and I had all the documented, I wish I'd have kept it, showing how a sweet potato was high in anti-oxic [antioxidants] and it was good for people that have migraines, oh it was a series of things. So I put interest, I didn't do it these year, growing sweet potatoes. There are other cancer-fighting...there is broccoli, asparagus, most green food are high in antioxidants, and you do know if you'd start kids out, and understand now, I know nothing about medicine, I barely know a little bit about gardening, but they claim if you start people early in life on those anti-oxidants, they won't have cancer. Now, whether that's true, that was the research I done on my sweet potatoes. It was a red sweet potato.



AH: Do me a favor and just paint a picture with words about the part of town that we're in, the neighborhood that surrounds this garden, the buildings, the houses, just sort of where we are in Charleston.

05:26

TT: Well, it's a big improvement over here because of the police, but she may know, this is not a place you would want to have a hotel or resort, but it's getting better. It used to be kinda...you've heard of the West Side, the shootings and all that. But really I haven't had too much. I haven't had that type of problem. But if we keep moving in areas with stuff like that, they'll move out! But this was, this area, it's better but if you'd go maybe east of here in the circle, it's been kinda rough, you know. And my feeling too on this, if we can continue to establish things like this and get kids interested, maybe they won't get on drugs, maybe they won't get involved in illegal activity if we can find something for 'em to do.

AH: You know, I used to teach at a residential facility for emotionally disturbed kids and they had, we had a thing called horticulture therapy, which was basically gardening! It was like a therapy exercise. Talk about, let me just give you a chance to talk about what it does for you, for you psychology, for a kid's psychology--or a grown-up--to you know, put their hands in the dirt and see where the food comes from and harvest and plant seeds and watch them grow.

TT: It was so funny, I've had funny experiences. I had a bunch of kids, and I had a bunch of tomato plants and we was planting 'em. I mean I was showing 'em sort of, made like a regimentary. I'd drill a hole, another person would come by and drop the tomato in, another would tamp it. You know, I had a little--it was going good. I had this big garden planted and everything you know and I looked back and we was planting mostly tomato plants. I was drilling a hole, one kid stick 'em in, the other kid would, I told them how to pat, but I looked back around and there was a kid pulling 'em up! (laughs) I said, no child abuse. I said son, please don't touch another one of those tomatoes! (laughs) And the other kids wanted to kill him. But I couldn't figure out why he was doing that! You know, and I said, there are some mental things. But you know if you get kids interested, they love to do this. I have one family, they're from Brazil, and the kids love to come in here and work. But the thing about it, I have to be careful who I let on here. I have 'em to sign a statement that there's no way I can be responsible and if they sign that, and they said it'd work in court. But kids love to come up here and work.

AH: I'm gonna just take a walk over here and look at these beds a minute.

TT: Here, here's some.

AH: Oh yeah, you got something else.

08:12

TT: This right here is in the development stages here. I just, like I said, the best thing happened, I have another lady, by the way, she's from New York, she's gonna come in with her family, gonna do, I'm gonna sort of help 'em to structure...I hope to grow green beans, corn, tomatoes, squash, broccoli, collards, kale, everything. But I'm gonna try to as much as possible to put emphasis on green food because it's really good for you, you know.

AH: What's the list of things that you grow right now?

TT: Oh, I grew a lot of corn, oh many I grew some bush beans, tomatoes, last year I had bush beans, tomatoes, kale, broccoli and spinach but I don't want to be, I don't want to dictate to people and sit down

with a group, I tell 'em, this is what I would like, but I want to do what they'd like, so we all can be in one accord. By the way I got expensive equipment in here. I had a generator stole out of there. I ain't gonna say nothing, so I try to lock it up.

AH: Yeah, it's an interesting balancing act that you have to do between protecting what you've got here and trusting and inviting the community to be a part of it.

TT: Well, that it's just, I just trust. My big thing, I hope I can pray to keep my deer out. The fence---I'm gonna work it out two ways. I might put in a cheap one, but the deer sorts, between the deer just, see those are beds over there too, see? Way over there? Those are beds and this really was my high yielding area right here.

AH: And the deer knew it!

TT: Oh yes! They love green beans.

10:03

Once I said, I said there were cutoff huge pipe that I use to make container beds out of these. There's nothing other down on the end. By the way, we grew a lot of peppers in here too. Peppers and green and red peppers. You know, eventually what I'd like to do, though, if we get this area here developed? I can show people how they can grow food and sell it and make a living out of it. But that's gonna take time.

AH: You've been really generous with your time. The last thing I'm gonna do is, we can just give our voices a break for a minute, and I'm just gonna take a walk around and just record the sound of the air, maybe get some birds.

TT: I'm gonna sit back against this.

AH: Yeah, let me--you want to sit down and warm up?

TT: By the way, something I didn't tell you.

AH: Yeah.

TT: Something I didn't tell you. See what I tell you, see backpacks (points at people) see look, right there. And it goes on 24/7.

AH: These are kids with backpacks.

TT: Men too, yeah, mmhm. Not careful, if it's not tied down, they'll take it. But they pretty much know me 'cause...by the way, I didn't tell you, I also have an orchard there. It's a peach and apple orchard in there. From that, this is Rebecca Street, this is 6th Avenue, but Rebecca Street sorta ties in with Kent, with them there over there, Charleston Urban Renewal has let me in West Virginia State use it.

11:36

END OF TAPE

END OF INTERVIEW