

Kednel Jean interviewed by Audry Abreu  
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Midtown Manhattan

My name is Audry Abreu, I'm interviewing Kednel Jean at Guttman Community College. Do you give me permission to record this oral history?

Kednel Jean: Yes, I do.

AA: Where did you grow up?

KJ: I was born in Haiti. In Cap-Haitien, Haiti, which is the second biggest city in Haiti. I was raised in Willamette Haiti, where my family is from, which is a little city on the border of DR and Haiti. I spent eight years of my life there. When I was eight I moved to New York City permanently. I lived in all of the boroughs mostly. I've lived in the Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn, and I spent a lot of time in Harlem. So I like to describe myself as a Haitian Yorker.

AA: Describe your favorite meal growing up.

KJ: Favorite meal growing up. I don't know if I had a favorite meal growing up, but growing up, I really enjoyed eating cultural foods. I like rice, beans, and chicken. Most of my meals consist of rice, chicken, and beans. That's basically my staples, my comfort food is. I don't have like a ... I don't want to say I had a favorite food growing up.

AA: Why was it significant to you?

KJ: It was significant for me because I came from a poor country, so rice is the thing. If I didn't have rice for dinner, I would be away until this day. If I don't eat rice for a few days, I feel like something is missing. It's part of my diet. It's almost like it's part of me. Do you know what I mean? I'm not sure why it's significant. I just think it's something like constantly we ate every day because you can get it in bulk. You can buy it in bulk, and it's cheap. Growing up poor, rice is something you always could get.

AA: Does a certain food reminds you of loved ones?

KJ: I know certain foods remind me of home, like Haiti. I guess that clicks through my loved ones. Like a mango. When I eat a mango, I think of home. You give me some avocado, I think of home because I have avocado in my backyard growing up in Haiti. Mango, my mum loves mango, so we shared our love together. If I see a mango, I buy one for myself, and one for my mom.

KJ: The tropical fruits like mango, quenepa, kenèp. We call it kenèp in Haiti. Every time I see it in the supermarket, I think of home. Or sugar cane, because when I was in Haiti, we used to go to cut sugar cane, and then we would eat that. All of those foods remind me of home.

AA: What is currently your favorite meal to eat, or to make?

KJ: Favorite meal to eat? I would say my favorite meal to eat is fried red snapper with fried plantains.

AA: Fried red snapper?

KJ: Yes, fried red snapper's a kind of fish. If you get a fresh red snapper and you fry that and you got to season that well, though. You can't just fry that. Make sure it's seasoned well. You clean the fish. You season it well. Do you know what I mean? Then fried plantains with that, that hit the spot. It's my favorite meal to eat right now.

AA: Why?

KJ: Why?

KJ: I just love eating that red snapper. I don't know. I've had it in Haiti. I had it in Costa Rica. I've had it here. I don't eat a lot of seafood, but the red snapper, that kind of fish to me is delicious, especially when it's seasoned well and fried is delicious.

AA: Does it carry any significance beyond the food itself?

KJ: Yeah, I guess, again, it reminded me of home. Living from a tropical island. The red snapper is a tropical fish. When I would travel back to Haiti a few years ago, and we had a chance to go to the beach, and they were grilling it. So we were having it on the grill, eating it makes me happy. All my happy moments I can count them of eating a red snapper. It's a lot of them of me sitting down, and talking with friends and enjoying that fish, and that meal.

AA: If you could pick anyone in the world, who would you eat your favorite meal with? Why? And what would you eat?

KJ: Anybody in the world?

KJ: I don't know. That's a good question. Right now, the first one I can think about, I would have a meal with Barack Obama. Why? Because I would love to just talk shop with Barack Obama and just see his mind. He's like a fun guy.

AA: What would you eat with him?

KJ: Oh, I would eat something that consists of using your hands. Maybe fufu, which is an African dish, and put that in a peanut sauce. Because I think when you are sitting down with somebody, and you're using your hands and what not to eat, you take the person out of their comfort zone, and you can see their true self. I want to hear Barack

Obama I think he has jokes for days. I want to talk to him about stuff and be normal. Barack Obama's got to be up there.

AA: Is there any food you will not eat?

KJ: Yes, I have a lot. I have a long list of foods I will not eat. Actually, I've never had bacon. I've never eaten pork. I've eaten pork but never had bacon. I will never eat crawfish. The list is just too long. For example, some people eat bunnies, rabbits.

AA: Tell me something that you will not eat. If there would remain no food in the world, or if you have the option to eat the least favorite food you would like, what is something you prefer to die than to eat?

KJ: I mean a human flesh. I definitely wouldn't eat that. That's the first thing I will not eat. That's nasty.

AA: Jajajajaja

AA: human flesh?

KJ: I don't want to be a... What's that called? A cannibal.

AA: You won't eat a cannibal?

KJ: No, a cannibal's is a person who eats its own kind. It only eats its own kind.

KJ: I don't want any bottom feeders. Like shrimp, I don't eat shrimp. I don't eat any of that stuff.

KJ: I'm mostly vegan now.

AA: Is there any food you don't eat because of your culture, politics, or religion?

KJ: Yes. I don't eat pork. Shrimp. Which is like any bottom feeder of the ocean, which is shrimp, crab, lobster. I've never had those things. Snail. What else? It's a long list.

AA: Why?

KJ: Because of my religion. I grew up Seventh-day Adventist, which is like a Christian sect. There's a long list of foods that we do not eat, similar to the Jews, the same kind of list of foods that Jews do not eat, we do not eat.

KJ: For instance, when I was a kid somebody accidentally fed me crab. However, it tasted good.

KJ: Oh, you want a funny story?

AA: What?

KJ: I was in Costa Rica one time and I was staying with a lady, and she was like, "Hey." Y'all was doing Spanish. She was like, "Hey, you want Arroz with Camarones?" And I'm like, "Camarones, what the heck is that?"

AA: jajajajaa

KJ: But I didn't want to ask her, so I'm like, "what's this Camarones, it sounds like Cameroon. Cameroon is a kind of nuts.

KJ: So I'm like, "That's weird, rice and some kind of nut. Like, whatever, I'll try it."

KJ: Come to find out it was rice and shrimp, with little tiny shrimp in there.

AA: Yeah.

KJ: I sat down and ate it Because didn't want to make the lady feel sad since I already told her yes.

KJ: That's the only time I ate shrimp.

AA: It was good?

KJ: I don't know, because I was so tiny.

AA: It was tasty, right?

KJ: The shrimp was too tiny, I didn't even taste the shrimp, it was tiny shrimp.

AA: What!

KJ: I don't even know what it tastes like.

AA: I love shrimps.

AA: Are there certain food you only eat on special occasions?

KJ: No.

KJ: These days I'm mostly a vegetarian, however, on Thanksgiving I eat Turkey because I feel bad. My family is small.

AA: You feel bad for what?

KJ: It's a big turkey and it's going to go to waste. It's like five of us sitting around the table with a big turkey.

AA: So you eat the turkey because you feel bad?

KJ: That's a good question. It's a deep question, wow.

KJ: Yeah.

AA: Because it's going to go to waste.

KJ: Funny thing is my mom used to say, "eat the meat like that." So it was like, all of us... But they keep a turkey, because, you know, American tradition and whatnot, which was crazy. I told her I'm not going to cook a Turkey no more.

AA: Who in your life cooks the best meal?

KJ: My mom and it's perfect. Her food is delicious.

AA: What do they cook?

KJ: My mom cooks in her traditional Haitian cuisine, rice, beans, and chicken, or fish. She came into a very good fish dish but, she's also now adventurous. She likes to blend stuff. So she'll have like Haitian and Asian. Then she'll have like, I don't know, she'll be figuring out things from like somewhere else. She likes to incorporate a lot of different things to her cooking now.

AA: What does eating well means to you?

KJ: Eating well means to me any things that your body will like for the longterm. And so not only eating things that are processed. So things like eating whole foods. I like to eat fruits, veggies. I like to mix, eat dumb junk food.

AA: Do you have a favorite restaurant?

KJ: No I don't. I don't even know my restaurants in my neighborhood.

AA: What?

KJ: Yeah, I'm serious. I don't really eat out like that. I like to eat food from home because I don't trust eating outside.

AA: How does the food you eat or cook make you who you are?

KJ: Food is very important, right? Because you need food to eat and you need food to live. I choose to eat food that are nutritious and that are basically like medicine to me. It

makes me somebody who's kind of health-conscious, who's thinking about what I'm putting into my body, and being mindful of not every food, quote-unquote, is good for my body. So, I have to make sure that I am fed with things that my likes, and that is good for it.

AA: If you could go anywhere in the world to try new food, where would you go, and why?

KJ: I would love to go to Africa and try the foods because it's so diverse over there. Think about it, it's rich food full of fruits and veggies. Plus you have all cultures. Therefore, I would love to go and try out different food. I'd love to do that. Try different food, so I would love to go to travel to all the countries and try everything that I can eat and that's on my list.

AA: But what if it's a country that's only about seafood?

KJ: I eat the fish. I want to eat the crab and the lobster and all that jazz, but I'm pretty sure they cook things. They have their vegetables really well too, and it's fresh.

AA: What is a meal or snack that you can eat all the time and not get tired of?

KJ: I can have chocolate all the time. Chocolate milk, dark chocolate. I kept all the time. You can give it to me all the time. I will never get tired. I drink chocolate milk every day. And that dark one, the ones that are real. You know, you get the block of chocolate, not the milk chocolate, though, the chocolate, before it's processed. Make chocolate milk with that, and you sip that. To me that's like, hmm, that's home right there. That's love.

KJ: I love that.

AA: What is the most important meal of the day for you? What do you look forward to every day?

KJ: Oh, I guess I look toward my first meal of the day, whatever that be. Sometimes it's breakfast. As a kid I used to love breakfast, some pancakes, scrambled eggs, and put that in the sauce right there. Not the sauce, but you know what I'm talking about. The maple syrup. Delicious.

KJ: But sometimes if you wake up late, like 12, or one o'clock, I used to still look Brunch.

KJ: So, whatever my first meal of the day is. Whether it be when I just wake up, or a couple of hours after, I'm looking forward to that, because I'm usually hungry.

AA: Have you had a sentimental time where you felt that food would be your only comfort?

KJ: Yeah, maybe.

KJ: I'm trying to think.

KJ: There are times, other times in my life when I feel sad, and I really wanted some chocolate. The chocolate will soothe me or, make me feel happy to eat that piece of chocolate.

KJ: There are times in my life where I don't think I'm obsessed with food in that way, but I think I look forward to eating some things, that I know the act of eating it will bring me joy, make me very happy to eat it.

KJ: But there are also times when I've gotten really upset because I was looking forward to eating something, and it didn't happen. There was a time where my mom had given me a sandwich, and she put it in the fridge. I still remember this day. Everybody had a sandwich, my brother had his own sandwich, my father had his own sandwich and I had my own sandwich. And they ate their sandwiches. I didn't mine I saved it for later since I was like "I'm going to eat this later." I was in high school at that time. I was like, "I'm going to go and eat this sandwich." And then my pops ate it.

KJ: I was so angry. I'm still angry to this day because everyone confirmed that the sandwich was so good.

AA: Have you ever faced real hunger?

KJ: Well. I used to think I faced real hunger since there are times in my life where I've felt hungry and I had to wait a long time to eat. But I now when I think about it, it's not real

KJ: Hunger. Like real hunger some people in the world face, where they go two or three days without eating. I've never gone through that.

KJ: My mom tells stories when she was in Haiti and how did she know they really had nothing, nothing. And they didn't see the possibility of the next time they would have food. So, that's different than me going half a day without eating or more.

KJ: I don't think that in that perspective, I didn't face real hunger to a point where I didn't know where my next meal is going to come.

KJ: I mean, thinking about it now, I had days in college where I ate once a day and that one meal was like pizza. So those times were tough because I knew I had only enough money to eat one time during the day. If I spent all my money I'd be hungry. So those days were tough, but I still felt like I had the resources. If I had to go ask somebody else to feed me, maybe they would have fed me.

KJ: It's not like some people in this world, or in this country.

AA: How will you feel if you couldn't eat your culture food again?

KJ: Oh I feel sad.

KJ: If I can't have rice and beans ever again? I'll live but I think something would be missing.

AA: What about if you can't have that fish?

KJ: That red snapper? That's different since the red snapper is a special meal for me. I don't eat it all the time. But, when I do eat it, it just brings me a lot of good memories.

KJ: If I can't eat fried plantains are good. Freshly fried plantains, that's really delicious. If you can't have that, or some pikliz, which is a Haitian kind of thing. I'd be sad.

KJ: I'd live, I'd be okay, because there are other foods in the world that I could eat, but still. That's home. That's me.

AA: That's tough.

KJ: Yeah.

AA: Is there anything that I should have asked?

KJ: I don't think so. This was an interesting conversation. I had fun thinking about food in whole new ways. I think food is super important. I also think that, as we know, as we get older we think about food in different ways.

KJ: At least for me. I think about food in a way like how can it help me feel better, think better? So, I try to eat things that are nutritious and feed my brain.

AA: Thank you.

KJ: Thank you.

KJ: You have a good day