

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
INTERVIEW WITH VANESSA ANNE SLINGER-FRIEDMAN

CONDUCTED, EDITED, AND INDEXED BY THOMAS A. SCOTT

for the

KSU ORAL HISTORY SERIES, NO. 161

PART I – WEDNESDAY, MARCH 4, 2020

PART II – THURSDAY, MAY 16, 2024

Kennesaw State University Oral History Project
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Interview with Vanessa Anne Slinger-Friedman
Conducted, edited, and indexed by Thomas A. Scott
Part I – Wednesday, March 4, 2020
Location: Kennesaw State University Archives, Sturgis Library

TS: The interview today is with Vanessa Slinger-Friedman, who won KSU's Outstanding Teaching Award for 2019. Let's begin with your educational background. I assume you were a traditional student going through college at the University of Florida. You made it through in the standard four years and were valedictorian in 1994, which is a remarkable achievement for such a large and prestigious university. Why don't you talk about why you went to the University of Florida and about your undergraduate education there? Were there any mentors who stand out from your undergraduate days?

VSF: Yes, I was a traditional student in terms of my age. But I was nontraditional in terms of my background because I was a foreign student. I was born and grew up in Trinidad and Tobago in the Caribbean. In Trinidad I went through all of my education up through high school, which would be called secondary school there. My final two years was doing advanced studies, A-Levels [Advanced Levels]—we were under the British system—in biology, geography, and English literature. So that gives you a sense that I was a bit of a generalist. Many people would focus on three science subjects or three business subjects. I've always dabbled a little bit in the hard sciences and social sciences and humanities.

TS: Good.

VSF: Doing my A-Levels in Trinidad gave me about eighteen to twenty credits coming into college. I guess it would be the equivalent of doing AP [Advanced Placement] courses, something like that. They were very, very intensive. You were expected to study three to six hours a day and really prepare for these exams at the end of the two years. That set me up with some really good time management and study skills. So coming to the University of Florida, I think I had a leg up in that area, which allowed me to earn a 4.0 GPA, which put me in the position to be valedictorian—along with the fact I had done many activities on campus, including working as a resident assistant, RA. So that just put me in a position to be valedictorian. Funnily enough, a couple years later, my sister went on to be valedictorian at the University of Florida. So, obviously, it was a work ethic we acquired.

TS: I guess, the University of Florida would be the closest major university in the United States?

VSF: Not necessarily. I could have gone to the University of Miami or somewhere like that. But Florida was key in the sense that it was close, and also I had two siblings who had gone there before me, and cousins who had gone there before that. So it was a bit of a chain migration, I guess, for lack of a better way of expressing it. It was considered to be a good school, and having seen my brother go through, we were able to get in-state

[tuition] fees through being RAs on campus. It really made economical sense to do it that way.

TS: Did you get to do any undergraduate research at all?

VSF: I did. I did a capstone project looking at Florida orange producers and orange juice producers under Professor Dr. Cesar Caviedes, who was a well-known Latin Americanist. My undergraduate advisor was Dr. Nigel [J. H.] Smith, and he had gotten his degrees at University of California in Berkeley. So those professors were both very influential.

TS: You must have stuck all the way through with Nigel Smith?

VSF: I did to some extent, although not with my master's program. I had moved to a new program in Latin American Studies. But Nigel Smith was influential from my very first semester, when I took an introductory geography course, and he was the professor. Not only was he a Latin Americanist, which appealed to me, but he had also consulted for the World Bank. It just thrilled me that not only was he a professor, but he showed me there was a career path for geography. That is something I try to do for my students because very often they take on a lot of parental pressure regarding, what are you going to do with that degree? There is a very limited perspective on what you can do with a geography degree. I think several Humanities and Social Sciences degrees get that kind of resistance. But I go out of my way to show students that there are lots of things you can do with a geography degree that are very fulfilling and financially stable careers.

TS: Yes. Something that interests me is what makes mentors memorable. What do they actually do for you that you remember? I think you've explained very well that he gave you a perspective on career options once you got out.

VSF: Definitely.

TS: And also the fact that he was involved beyond the university out in the world community. So you got through in four years and it looks like you went straight into the master's program. I suppose it was natural to switch to Latin American Studies given your background, although Trinidad and Tobago is not exactly Latin America.

VSF: True. It was one of my final semesters in my undergraduate geography degree program that I had a Geography of Agriculture course. A graduate student from another program came in and spoke on Brazil nut collectors forming collectives to enhance their bargaining power, etc., for Brazil nuts. I was enthralled about the Brazilian Amazon and the work she was doing. I asked her, "How do I do what you're doing?" And she told me about the Master's in Latin American Studies Program (MALAS). She was specifically in the tropical conservation and development focus. So she advised me to meet with her advisor, Marianne, Dr. Marianne Schmink, who was a well-known anthropologist, particularly well known for her work in the Western Amazon.

I met with her and found out you needed to have an advisor to even get into the program. I remember my meeting with her was a little intimidating because she said, “Well, your record looks great, but I need three reference letters before I can even consider taking you on.” I think it was after my first reference letter she called me up. She said, “No, I think I’m going to take you on as a student [laughs].” But she said she insisted that I study Portuguese for a year and go out to the Brazilian Amazon. I did a study abroad in Rio de Janeiro to improve my Portuguese. I went out to Acre, which is the most western state in Brazil, and found a project. My first summer in the master’s program I ended up doing research on a peri-urban agroforestry system just on the outskirts of Rio Branco, which is the capital of the State of Acre.

TS: It seems like the broad background in biology and geography has been very useful hasn’t it?

VSF: I think very much so.

TS: So did you do a master’s thesis on the peri-urban agroforestry system?

VSF: I did. Agroforestry systems have annual crops—your corn and bananas, things that grow there—and perennial crops, which are your tree crops. Then you have also animals integrated. So it replicates better a closed loop system that is technically more sustainable. The idea is that these were former rubber tappers and Brazil nut collectors who had come into Rio Branco, their capital city, and didn’t have urban skills. They couldn’t go work in an office. So the government created a project just on the outskirts of Rio Branco where these people who had agricultural skills were given land.

TS: Given land by the government?

VSF: By the government, yes; it was a government project. They were given land to grow these agroforestry systems. The idea was that they were supplying the city. The city was benefiting from having this source of agriculture, and they were utilizing skills that they had, not trying to get jobs that they really weren’t equipped for. But the systems were fairly new. So I used a linear program to look forward four to eight years to see how the systems would grow and how they would do. The conclusion was that down the line these systems would be yielding a certain amount and would be productive in a certain way, and it was addressing issues like the people who were basically unemployed. I mean, the alternative was really block housing. They were creating some really ugly block housing for people living in squatter settlements. So it seemed at that point to be addressing some of the major issues that a major urban area in the Amazon was experiencing. Many people don’t understand that even in the Amazon there is urbanization. People generally perceive the Amazon as only very rural.

TS: Deforestation in the Amazon has been very controversial with the current Brazilian president seemingly more interested in development.

VSF: Yes. People don't realize that in the Amazon there are major cities that are dealing with urban problems that are common to any major urban area.

TS: Does Brazil work like the U.S. system of federalism with states having a lot of control over what they do as opposed to the national government?

VSF: Yes. There is federalism.

TS: Acre sounds like a very progressive state government.

VSF: Yes, I guess, in some respects you could say they had some fairly progressive programs.

TS: Giving people land and that kind of thing.

VSF: Yes, I mean, there were definite stipulations; they had to show productivity and they were actually working the land and moving in the right direction.

TS: But you didn't really care about the government; you were focusing on the agriculture.

VSF: Really, I was focusing on the productivity of the systems and the impact they were having on these people's lives. A lot of my research tends to do that. I look at the system as well as how they are impacting the people involved.

TS: So you returned to geography for the doctoral program?

VSF: Yes. I did give pause to two questions I had at that point: continuing straight on because a lot of people might say, "It is good to take a break"; and also some people might say, "Why stay at the same university?" But I was offered great funding. For my master's work I got a two-year fellowship through the Tropical Conservation and Development Program in MALAS, Latin American Studies. They offered two additional years of funding if the Geography department would offer me a two-year teaching assistantship.

TS: I was going to ask whether you were doing any teaching along the way?

VSF: My final two years I did. It was probably one of the best things I ever did because it taught me I had a passion for teaching. I think it scared me silly—the thought of getting up in front of 150 students.

TS: So you were teaching your own classes?

VSF: I was developing and teaching my own classes, yes.

TS: Was it Intro to Geography that you were teaching?

VSF: Yes, World Regional Geography, which is actually the same course I was initially brought on here at KSU to teach. So I had many years of experience teaching it before I

even left my graduate program. I knew a fellow graduate student who taught that course years before me. I sat in her class for an entire semester, and she was really influential. Her name is Sharon [C.] Cobb. She got her PhD and went to teach at the University of North Florida in Jacksonville. Watching her teach, I think I model a lot of things that she did because I admired her so much.

TS: What would be some of those things?

VSF: Her enthusiasm. You got the sense that she really wanted to make sure students understood. She went the extra mile to explain things in a way that was very accessible. She was just a very interesting presenter. She was prepared.

TS: But I know for graduate students there is oftentimes a dilemma between spending a lot of time on the students you teach and needing to finish the PhD program. You have the classes you are taking or the papers you are writing and your own students, grading papers, preparing for class, and that kind of thing. How did you deal with it, especially if you have large classes like you are describing?

VSF: Yes, yes. Once again, my work habits that were instilled from my last two years in Trinidad, doing A-Levels, I think. Also I think I very much work on the fear of failure model, which for some people can be quite destructive, but for me it makes me very productive because I very much want to do well. I think for some people it paralyzes them. They don't want to fail, so they don't do anything.

TS: Don't try, so you can't fail.

VSF: Yes, exactly. Then for me, it works in another way in that it makes you perhaps a little bit of a perfectionist.

TS: So you were working twenty-four hours a day?

VSF: Not quite. I tried to strike a good balance because I do have kids and a family.

TS: Even when you were in graduate school?

VSF: No, I met my husband when I came back from my PhD research. I had already done my year living abroad for my PhD research and met him after I came back. He had two kids from a previous marriage who became my instant children.

TS: Well, you had your hands full.

VSF: Yes, I stay busy.

TS: It's amazing you got through as fast as you did. I guess you earned your master's in 1996 and your doctorate by 2002, so six years.

VSF: Yes, and I did a year's worth of international research.

TS: I was going to ask you about your dissertation. It was entitled "Ecotourism in a Small Caribbean Island: Lessons Learned for Economic Development and Nature Preservation." Which island was it?

VSF: Dominica, which is between Martinique and Guadalupe. It's an English-speaking island. Several people confuse it for the Dominican Republic, which is Spanish-speaking. So that's why I clarified that it is English-speaking. It is just one of the most beautiful places in the world.

TS: Is that where you did your year abroad?

VSF: I did. I lived there for a year and actually lived a month in the Carib Territory. They call it *Waitukubuli*, which means, "tall is her body" because it is a very mountainous island. It is said to be one of the only islands that has indigenous population still remaining. They are known as the Caribs, but they're also known as the Kalinago. That is their tribe name that they use for themselves. But Dominica is so mountainous and undulating. I mean, we're not talking about the Andes or Himalayas, but the terrain is very rugged. Columbus was there, and you see in the literature, they say Columbus—and this is probably fictitious—went back to Europe to Ferdinand and Isabella, crumpled a piece of paper, threw it on the ground, and said, "That's what Dominica looks like (laughs)."

TS: How big an island is it?

VSF: Twenty-nine miles long by 16 miles wide [290 square miles].

TS: Pretty small.

VSF: But you are talking about with undulating mountains, so it is not like you look straight across like that.

TS: How many people live there?

VSF: Less than one hundred thousand [2018 World Bank estimate of 71,625]. So it's a small population.

TS: And ecotourism—are they selling their mountains and the weather to attract tourists to go there?

VSF: It's a volcanic island with black sand beaches. So it is not your traditional "sun, sea and sand" 3S kind of tourism where people go and sit on a white sand beach. It's volcanic black sand. There are many geological features, volcanic features that are just fascinating. You can go and bathe in sulphur springs. You can even hike to a fumarole,

which is like a boiling cauldron with vents coming up from under the earth. So it is beautiful, and it pulls in ecotourists who have very specific desires to see fairly untouched places, last visited places. The hope was with ecotourism it was having a different impact. Because 3S tourism for quite a while has been criticized as being foreign entities coming in with lots of money, creating a hotel on a beach, and not really benefiting local people because the managers will be foreign managers as opposed to trying to find somebody locally.

You might not have the kind of educational skill coming locally. Even agriculture can be negatively impacted—3S tourists might expect a type of meal that would be more Americanized or from Europe—so the country will import a lot of products. With ecotourism the idea is that the tourists that are coming are different kinds of tourists, more interested in experiencing local food. So you are going to stimulate linkages to local industries like agriculture. They want to have the local experience, hire local tour guides, and pump more money into the economy directly.

TS: Did the people in charge already understand that? Or did your dissertation say, “This is what they ought to do, whether they realize it or not?”

VSF: They were doing it to the best of their ability. That is what they were saying and doing. Yes, they were doing it, although, obviously, nothing is perfect. So I found linkages were being created. That was the main focus. But there was a parallel focus on cruise-ship tourism, which is not ecotourism. You can do it in limited numbers, but if you’re bringing mass tourists, and you’re trying to take them to sensitive sites, they may be destroying the pathways by trampling on them.

TS: So you want fewer, but more enlightened tourists.

VSF: Yes, and the idea is that they will pay more. You limit your number of tourists, but maybe they pay more.

TS: And they are happier because they have the island to themselves.

VSF: Probably.

TS: You mentioned the Caribs, the indigenous people. Who are the rest of the people of Dominica—former enslaved people, migrants from England, or from somewhere else?

VSF: The population is very similar to many Caribbean islands. Europeans came, and they brought enslaved Africans. The majority population on the island today consists of descendants of enslaved Africans. So the population is majority Black. In places like Trinidad, where I grew up, you will find a more even population distribution between Black people and descendants from India and East Indians.

TS: East Indians?

VSF: That's because when slavery was abolished [between 1833 and 1838], Trinidad had sugarcane plantations and there was still the need for a fairly large labor force. So indentured laborers from East Asia arrived in Guyana and Trinidad in a much larger way than many other Caribbean islands.

TS: That's interesting.

VSF: So the population distribution is quite different in those islands, where you have probably about 40 percent Black population, 40 percent Indian population, and the rest of Asian, European, or mixed descent. Miscegenation is very common. But Dominica didn't have as many East Indian descendants. There is a more concentrated Black population, and then of course the indigenous population.

TS: What is their agriculture like nowadays?

VSF: Bananas in the past were referred to as green gold. That was what the economy was based on. They had preferential trade agreements with Europe. But then with the WTO, World Trade Organization, things changed about the 1990s, I think. They lost a lot of those preferential trade agreements, so they went through a downturn. Ecotourism was one of the ways that they were trying to improve their economy and find an alternative.

TS: Did anybody in Dominica read your dissertation, and did they implement any of the things you suggested?

VSF: I hope they read it. I don't know that I was necessarily setting out to suggest anything to them. I think I was more looking at what they were doing and what impact it was having at that point. It certainly contained a critique of some of the concerning aspects. They were looking at building an international airport, which would have destroyed a beautiful landscape.

TS: They didn't have enough flat land for an international airport, did they?

VSF: They were going to build into a mountain, basically knock the mountain down. They actually talked about building a cable car system into one of the national parks, which was an UN-designated world heritage site. I don't know if you know anything about world heritage sites, but some ecotourists look specifically for such sites and visit as many as they can. Well, the UN said they were going to take away the designation, so luckily they didn't do that. Those are two that come off the top of my head that the government considered doing and were red flags. Unfortunately, Dominica has experienced several really terrible hurricanes that have set it back. They have had to rebuild several times in terms of their tourist industry.

TS: Have you continued to do research on ecotourism?

VSF: I actually went back in 2008-2009 and did some research on the southeastern part of the island, looking at the linkage between a particular resort and the community to see what

was happening. I came back, and Dominica suffered a hurricane [Tropical Storm Erika 2015] that destroyed the resort. It destroyed the community there; it was terrible. My whole research at that point moved to the southwest part of the island. The research in the southeastern part was no longer valid. So I haven't done follow up there. There are so many things that I want to do, but it would be great to go back to Dominica and do more research in the indigenous community because I did live there for a month. I wrote a paper that got published in the *Annals of Tourism Research* on that community. So I would love to go back and study more there and then also to do some follow up.

TS: Is the Kalinago community integrated into the larger society at all or are they very poor or what?

VSF: The community has its own territory. They are somewhat set apart, and I think that's how they like it. They have a strong self-identity as Kalinago or Carib people. The population is about three thousand. They are integrated into Dominican society with regard to economics and trade, etc. But they are allowed to elect their own representatives to their own council. They do have a bit of autonomy, but for most intents and purposes, they are economically linked to Dominica. But physically they have their own territory.

TS: It sounds like the Native Americans of the United States who went through the debate that we are better off economically if we assimilate, but we lose our culture if we do.

VSF: Right.

TS: You are doing some fascinating work. So you earned your PhD in 2002. How did you get to Kennesaw State as a part-time faculty member?

VSF: I spent a year in Dominica. I came back up, and a month later I went to my cousin's wedding in St. Augustine. There I met my husband to be. He lived in Atlanta, in Tucker, Georgia. He was there for the wedding. He was best friends and roommates with my cousin in college, but ten years ahead of me. So I hadn't met him before. Ten months later we were married. Hence, I came to live in Tucker, Georgia. While I was writing my dissertation, I wanted to also support myself. So I looked around for teaching jobs and got to know about Kennesaw, interviewed here, and got a part-time position.

TS: So you had the part-time position before you finished your doctorate?

VSF: Yes, I did. I was writing and teaching here at the same time. I started at Kennesaw in August of 2002 and graduated December 2002. During the year that I was teaching part-time, a tenure-track position opened up in the department. I applied for it and got it. In that year that I was here at Kennesaw, I really enjoyed my colleagues. We were a very small department. We were actually Sociology, Geography, Anthropology, and Criminal Justice altogether.

TS: Was Lana [J.] Wachniak the chair at that time?

VSF: Yes, she was the chair. Then [Samuel] Sam Abaidoo took over. It was small. I think I had four other colleagues in geography itself, within the larger department of Sociology, Anthropology, Criminal Justice, and Geography.

TS: I guess Mark Patterson was here.

VSF: Mark [W.] Patterson, Garrett Smith, Agatino—what was Tino’s last name? [LaRosa] Sadly, he has passed away. He moved back to Italy to work in his family's businesses. [Harold] Harry Trendell, who has now retired—Mark, Garrett, Harry, Tino, and myself. That might be it. I hope I’m not forgetting anybody, and then anthropologist Wayne Van Horne. Then we had part-timers who I got to know also through Susan [Kirkpatrick] Smith who was a chair later of the Department of Geography and Anthropology.

TS: Had Betty Smith retired?

VSF: Not quite, but very soon after. But Wayne, Susan. Terry [G.] Powis was part-time, and he is full-time and tenured now as well. Susan Smith became our chair and just stepped down. But it was a small, but really nice group of people. I loved the nontraditional students that we had here at KSU. I was teaching very large classes. The conversations in the classroom at the University of Florida were with very traditional, very young students, eighteen to twenty years old.

TS: Right, and they don’t know anything.

VSF: You said it, not me (laughs). But here at Kennesaw that first year I was teaching courses with people of varying ages, different experiences. It was so interesting. Even though it was a large class, there was a lot of participation and discussion. I mean, I still remember some interactions I had. It was just a lovely year of teaching, even though for me it was quite a drive to get to work.

TS: I was going to say you had a long commute from Tucker.

VSF: It is about an hour. Now it is getting worse and worse, an hour and fifteen minutes.

TS: You still live in Tucker?

VSF: I am yes, because my husband lives close to his work.

TS: You need to compromise and move in between (laughs)?

VSF: No, we love where we are. It is a great community and beautiful area. Kennesaw has a lot of long timers. I remember being so impressed when I came here. My first couple of years I would be in meetings, and people would be like, “I’ve been here twenty to twenty-five years.” And I’d be like, “Wow.” Now, I’ve been here almost twenty years.

TS: It’s amazing isn’t it?

VSF: It is crazy. How long have you been here?

TS: Since 1968.

VSF: Oh, my God (laughs).

TS: Before you were born.

VSF: Yes (laughs). So I think part of me thought, "If these people have stayed here this long, there is obviously something good about this place." I found it very attractive too, and I wanted to be here.

TS: You got here right at a turning point in our history with the coming of residence halls that were going to change the student culture big time.

VSF: Yes. Yes. I've seen so many changes. I think the student population was about 13,000 [13,951 in fall 2001; 15,654 in fall 2002, according to the KSU 2003-2004 Fact Book] at that point. And now we're up to almost 38,000. The shift in student ages from more nontraditional to traditional; and the physical footprint of the campus may not be hugely different, but different enough.

TS: It is also a more diverse student body now than 2002.

VSF: Definitely more, and just tremendous changes. I think many want to hold onto bits of that culture that we had before. But we are also moving in a very different direction. Some would call it progress, but some are very frustrated at the pace at which it is going. So I think KSU has definitely had its growing pains, and it is still having its growing pains.

TS: Sure, but you liked it here?

VSF: Yes. I liked it here, wanted to stay, and got the tenure track position.

TS: Did you apply anywhere else that year?

VSF: I did apply to some other positions. They were long shot in the sense that there are not a lot of geography departments, and some geography departments have a different focus. Georgia State very much had a physical geography focus, and their program is primarily geophysical. It wasn't as appropriate for someone like me who is really more of a human geographer. I do cross the boundary. I'm more human-environment interaction and look at how humans impact their environment and vice versa. I did look at Georgia State, but that was probably an outlier or a long shot because it was more a geophysical. I looked at an environmental position at Emory, but I really didn't have the strength of background for an environmental position, particularly at that point. Now, it might be a different case, but at that point I didn't have that strength. But this was a perfect fit at Kennesaw in terms of the position and what it expected.

TS: Well, it was such a small department that you probably could teach whatever direction you wanted to go in without any competition from anybody else.

VSF: That has been one of the great things about being at Kennesaw. I have been able to pursue courses that are interesting to me and that are in my wheelhouse.

TS: You've been promoted right on schedule all along to full professor. What specifically were you recruited to teach? I guess as part-time faculty you were teaching the basic courses.

VSF: Right, the World Regional Geography [GEOG 1130].

TS: How was the position advertised that you actually got it in 2003?

VSF: It did focus on someone who could teach those introductory courses. That was the main focus. We didn't yet have that shift where it was more of a research focus. I think now when you look at jobs for which we are advertising, you'll see that we're looking for more of a balance. KSU was still very much a "teaching institution." I remember my teaching demo that I did.

TS: We were doing more than teaching, but teaching was the Number One criteria for being promoted.

VSF: Definitely. I think people were encouraged to do research, but not at the level we are being encouraged today.

TS: Encouraged, but not necessarily supported.

VSF: That is absolutely true, absolutely true. The demand was to do more with the same amount of time (laughs) and with no additional resources in many cases. Sometimes you get resources, sometimes you don't.

TS: With your "fear of failure" philosophy that shouldn't be something to hold you back would it?

VSF: And I think that is why I was able to get promoted on schedule because I've done what it took to do to get through and get promoted. I have been appreciative of collaborations with faculty to do research. Some who are still here at KSU; some have left and gone on to do other jobs. But Dr. Lynn [M.] Patterson and I definitely worked together on many research collaboration.

TS: What was her background?

VSF: She actually earned an Urban and Regional Planning PhD from Georgia Tech. She is a tremendous teacher, great, great professor! Students loved her. And she still teaches now and again at Georgia Tech. I think she tries to do at least one course a year, but she

has her own consulting company now [Three Points Planning, LLC]. She is a great example of someone I collaborated with. Today I'm so appreciative to collaborate with Dr. Jason [R.] Rhodes, who is a lecturer [of Human Geography] and goes so far beyond. The lecturers have to teach five courses [a semester], but he has done amazing things with student groups. We are doing some research on a food forest out at KSU's Field Station. So these are the kinds of collaborations.

TS: Where is the KSU Field Station?

VSF: That is what in the past was referred to as the KSU farm.

TS: Okay, so out Hickory Grove Road.

VSF: Yes, exactly.

TS: What are you all doing out there exactly?

VSF: What we're doing on a very small piece of land, one eighth of an acre, is we're creating a permaculture system. People are like, "What's permaculture?" It is very much like agroforestry in that you're trying to replicate a closed loop system with tree crops and food crops and animals. We can't incorporate animals out there. The animals are very labor intensive. So that's one piece that's missing. But you can simulate the impact that animals would have through manure and so on. So we are creating it on a very small piece of one eighth of an acre. The idea is for it to be a model for other urban areas. We are in the Metro Atlanta area. If small communities around us want to replicate the system, they can send their people to come and get training. They can get certifications like organic agriculture certifications, organic composting certification, or permaculture certification. But the system takes four years to create. You have to take a while to design it, which is the phase we are in. We are doing it through a Geography of Sustainable Agriculture course [GEOG 4490 Special Topics in Geography] that Dr. Rhodes is teaching this semester. The students are working on designing the system, then we implement it, and then we can start doing training with it. So we are very excited about this.

TS: It sounds like a good project. It appears that a number of the courses you teach were topics you developed. Geography of Latin America and the Caribbean [GEOG 3370]: did we have that before you came?

VSF: No, that was a new course. I remember going through the process. Alan [V.] LeBaron [professor of history] was so supportive of that course. He does many courses in history that are related to Latin America and the Caribbean. But this one, obviously, has a different focus looking at the geography. So he was super-supportive of developing it. I've been teaching it for quite a while now. I love that course and really enjoy teaching it.

TS: How often do you get to teach it?

VSF: Once a year, because it supports the Latin American and Latina/o Studies minor in the Interdisciplinary Studies Department. Then another course was developed by Dr. Lynn Patterson, but I took it over when she left. It is a course in Local and Global Sustainability [GEOG 3710]. The course is very labor intensive for me because I do a lot of very creative innovative stuff in it. I try and do at least five field trips. I have students do service learning. Then we do project-based learning as well. I teach that course about once a year as well. It just depends on what is going on and what the department needs. But that is one I've been doing now for about four years.

TS: Where do you go on your field trips?

VSF: We go to Southface Institute, which looks at sustainability in the built environment.

TS: And where is that?

VSF: That is in downtown Atlanta at 241 Pine Street. It is such an interesting building. They built it around the time of the Olympics, and they used it as a showcase, so people could come and tour it. They used building techniques that are considered to be more sustainable. Just their ventilation systems, the materials that they used, reclaimed materials. The idea behind Southface is that you put your windows facing south, so you get natural heating.

TS: Oh, that's where the name comes from?

VSF: Yes, exactly. The idea is that you want students to think about what would be appropriate building techniques within certain regions. Obviously, for Georgia it's going to be different than if you were looking at Iceland or somewhere in the Caribbean. So that is one idea. I can talk about it in class, but if they can actually go and see it in person, that makes a tremendous difference. I had a student who then went on to do the Southface Fellowship Program. I've found that the service learning and the project-based learning and the field trips actually connect students with real world application of course content in a way that triggers them to go and get internships or to do directed applied study or research, directed by research in these areas. So it's really exciting.

TS: Where else did you go on field trips?

VSF: We went to Georgia Tech to look at their water systems. They have incredible cisterns where they store water. It is really incredible just how they have molded their landscape to use water most efficiently.

TS: Do they recycle their own water?

VSF: They're collecting water, yes. They are addressing some issues with the Chattahoochee River system. By creating their drainage systems in such a way where they're more effectively draining and storing water, it takes pressure off the Chattahoochee River system.

- TS: Are they using the water they are saving to irrigate the land or what?
- VSF: Yes, things like that: irrigating land or flushing toilets or gray water, that kind of thing. We visited WestRock, which is our recycling facility for KSU. It is close to Marietta [1775 County Services Parkway, Marietta]. It is an amazing facility that we have a great collaboration with them on improving our recycling.
- TS: I'm thinking all kind of internships and job opportunities from what you're exposing the students to!
- VSF: Yes. Keep Cobb Beautiful, which is part of Cobb County Government—we've had a number of students intern at Keep Bartow Beautiful, Keep Cobb Beautiful, Keep Kennesaw Beautiful—a number of environmental based internships.
- TS: What kind of service projects do they do?
- VSF: They do service learning of up to ten to twelve hours in an organization of their choice. It has to be sustainability related. Students will go and spend the time with Trees Atlanta or somewhere like Keep Cobb Beautiful, doing their recycling program. They can do it on campus. I want to make it convenient to the students. We have a number of sustainability related student organizations, like OwlSwap, which looks at sustainability in the textile area, or work with the Office of Sustainability here on campus. So they can go as far a field as they want, but I do try and provide them with opportunities that are close as well because many of our students are working and have families.
- TS: The things you're doing, all your work with internships has to be time consuming.
- VSF: Very time consuming.
- TS: How many students are doing an internship at any given semester?
- VSF: I was the internship coordinator for five years. Dr. Garrett Smith has taken that position over. Garrett interviewed me my first time here at KSU and was the one who recommended my initial part-time hire.
- TS: He was department chair for a while.
- VSF: Yes, when we first became a department of Geography and Anthropology [in 2006], after we split off from Sociology and Criminal Justice. I am the Environmental Studies discipline coordinator. We have a minor in environmental studies. I advise and consult with those students, make sure they have the classes they need for that minor, and make course substitutions when they can't find what they need to make sure they have a path through that minor. Last year and since about 2017 we worked on developing and pushing forward a proposal for an Environmental Studies major. This was going off of work done by Dr. Mark Patterson who is a Geography professor.

You probably know it takes a tremendous amount of work to get together all that paperwork. We were promoted as one of top two top programs out of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences to get that major. Unfortunately, at the dean's level, there is a very limited number that gets selected. I think four programs were recently promoted to have majors or graduate programs, and the Environmental Studies major didn't make the cut at that level. There was a tremendous amount of support and enthusiasm at the college level for this major. I think there is a lot of recognition that Environmental Studies is very relevant at this point in human history.

TS: Environmental Studies are obviously interdisciplinary.

VSF: Very interdisciplinary. The curriculum is very interdisciplinary.

TS: I guess it includes what [William E.] Bill Ensign is doing out on Raccoon Creek [Paulding County, Georgia] with his fish studies. There are a lot of things going on in the College of Science and Mathematics.

VSF: Yes. There is an Environmental Science degree. But we put forward a very good case for Environmental Studies being very different from that program. Environmental Science is much more Biology-based or hard science focused, whereas Environmental Studies, the way we had it structured, is extremely interdisciplinary.

TS: So it has to be in our College of Humanities and Social Sciences?

VSF: Right. I think there was support even from people in the Environmental Sciences in the College of Science and Mathematics. But I think, obviously, there will be a lot of competition when you have programs going up across the university. A lot of different factors have to be taken into consideration.

TS: Well, I hope you decide to keep pushing forward.

VSF: Yes, absolutely. There's a huge demand from students. Huge amount!

TS: You've also done a semester-long workshop for faculty on building a website.

VSF: Yes. From 2012 through 2016 I was the associate director for distance learning in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. I didn't leave my department. This was just in addition to doing what I regularly do. I worked with Dr. [Tamara M.] Tammy Powell from Distance Learning in CHSS [College of Humanities and Social Sciences]. She had already created and I taught the "Build a Web Course" workshop. It's a semester-long professional development [course] for faculty where they learn how to build an online web course using rubrics and criteria that are designed around quality matters, QM. The idea was just to be thoughtful about how you teach online. It's a very different teaching modality, and it's not a natural translation from classroom teaching to teaching online. Just because you teach well in a classroom doesn't necessarily translate to teaching well online. I think you have to be more intentional and thoughtful about how you design

things online because you don't have the ability to walk into a classroom and present something to a student. You have to think about what I put online, how is it going to be received, is it really accessible to everybody? So I think doing that made me a better professor, not only in my own online teaching, but face-to-face teaching.

TS: How much online teaching do you do?

VSF: It depends on the semester. There are semesters where about half of my teaching is online. But I typically only teach Geography 1101, which is the Intro to Human Geography course, online right now. I have some other courses that are developed in hybrid format that I could very easily transition into fully online.

TS: I was wondering in your Local and Global Sustainability course how much time is devoted to lectures. You are doing a whole lot with service learning and field trips and what have you. You are, obviously, doing far beyond the classroom.

VSF: Right, but not too far off from what you would regularly find. Obviously, the field trips do take up a bit of time. I tend to structure that where we meet once a week and do back-to-back classes. So we get the full time to go on the field trips. However, they do the service learning outside the classroom time. Then they do the project-based learning in the format of the Owl Planet Project. So they find a sustainability issue that they're passionate about. It could be recycling, it could be solar energy, or how we are resourcing textiles and processing the waste from textiles. They research what the situation is at KSU. Then they do research on what's happening elsewhere, what are the best-case scenarios or best practices in relation to their passion, their topic. Then they make suggestions on what we can be doing better at KSU.

Sometimes this actually leads to implementation of a project. I'll give you an example that really is exciting. One project that went all the way to fruition was the KSU sustainability map. If you go online, you can actually find a map created by a student. It is a KSU sustainability map for both campuses. It highlights sustainability aspects for KSU. Another example that's actually in process right now—a student did research on creating a Braille trail, creating an area connected to nature [the KSU Arboretum] that people who have disabilities in terms of sight, etc., can access and enjoy. The student, Artis Trice, is actually a [2019] Newman Civic Fellow Scholar. He is a Geography student, and he is working with the Office of Sustainability to create the Braille trail.

TS: So there will be little stops along the way where you can touch something and read about what is there?

VSF: I don't know exactly what is going to go into place, so I don't want to make promises. But this is something that he is developing and going through all the permissions trying to get it implemented.

TS: How do you think Kennesaw is doing in regard to sustainability?

VSF: I think we've come a long way in some respects. We have some great people here who are very enthusiastic and doing a great job. Jennifer Wilson is our Sustainability coordinator in the Office of Campus Planning and Sustainability, and she is amazing, amazing! She's such a treasure here at KSU. She is trying to move the marker on the very bad perception about recycling here at KSU. A lot of people think it just doesn't happen. That is not true. We actually work closely with WestRock, and we do recycle.

TS: Why do folks think that it doesn't happen?

VSF: I cannot tell you the number of students and faculty who tell me, "It doesn't matter where you put your recyclables or your trash; it all goes in the same place." Which is not true. So she is working hard right now on changing that perception, doing education around recycling.

TS: They must have seen somebody's recycling trucks where they take your recyclables and just throw them all in together.

VSF: Well, there is single stream recycling, obviously, where a lot of it does go together. Then they sort it out at the facility. We're going through a whole change in the process right now. She's looking at options for piloting solar on campus. Obviously, we have the Commons where chef Brian Jones is amazing and trying to do some things to improve sustainability. But I think there are areas that we could be improving. We don't have a lot of specific policies about resource use and recycling and sustainability on the whole.

I think if we were intentional about our policies, we would think through how do we want to represent ourselves and how do we want to best use our resources. We would cut costs, we would be more efficient and thoughtful about our resource use, and we would be able to tell a very good story about where we access our resources—we want to make sure it's coming from sustainable sources that are ethical and treat people fairly—but also what we do with our waste afterwards. So I think there is a lot of room for improvement, while at the same time we've made progress.

TS: The Math and Statistics building outside our window has a flat roof where perhaps the whole roof could be covered with solar panels.

VSF: There are all sorts of issues you have to consider about when you create solar panels or roof gardens. I would love to see roof gardens at KSU. On the Marietta campus there is an architecture professor who worked with students on doing that on a limited scale. There are a lot of very enthusiastic, well-intentioned people that want sustainability to be a priority for KSU.

TS: But it's not a priority?

VSF: I don't think it is a priority from the administrative side. In 2017 they got rid of the director of Sustainability position on the academic side when Dr. R. C. [Robert C.] Paul retired.

TS: He retired and they didn't fill his position?

VSF: They didn't fill it. They held interviews, and I was one of the candidates. We were down to two candidates, and then we found out after the entire process had taken place that they had axed the position. So there is nobody [in the administration] giving that focus to including sustainability in the curriculum. That is something that R. C. Paul did for so many years. He got together faculty and talked about how you could include sustainability concepts across the disciplines. In pretty much any discipline you can include sustainability. It's so important. This is a crucial topic right now.

TS: Well, you're obviously enthusiastic about teaching. You're doing lots of work with students. I wonder if we could talk about your teaching philosophy. I know in your first year here as assistant professor, you were involved in a CETL [Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning] Book Club on Parker Palmer's *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. He was one of [former KSU president] Betty Siegel's gurus. What did you get out of that course and to what degree did it influence your philosophy of teaching?

VSF: I think my philosophy of teaching has really evolved to some extent. I still believe strongly in it being a thing of passion, where your enthusiasm pulls students along with you. That is crucial. But I think today what has become foremost of importance to me in my teaching is that students learn how to apply the concepts and the knowledge they get through course content and put those into applied real-world scenarios. That is probably why more of my courses are shifting to things like project-based learning, service learning, and field trips. I want students to take the material that we've talked about in class, that they've read, that they've written papers on, and then go and see it being applied in real life, to see it happen. I have seen the difference that makes is tremendous. It lights a fire under them. I've seen students that have been lost, not sure about what they're going to do, completely changed their trajectory or really become confident in what they want to do because of that.

TS: Talk a little more about project-based learning. What would be some examples of projects that students would take on?

VSF: It is a little of what I was talking about before. An example is the Owl Planet Projects that I have students do where they identify an area that is a need. Then they assess what is there already and best-case practices, and then how you can suggest alternatives to improve an issue or present solutions or alternatives to address a real-life issue. It might be something like last year I had a group of students in my Local and Global Sustainability course who looked at recycling at KSU and then looked at the alternative of putting a MRF [pronounced murf], a materials recovery facility, here at KSU. A number of other places like Emory University have a MRF. They actually went and toured a couple of places that have MRFs and then looked at the economic feasibility as much as they could within the context of being students. Then they made a presentation that we actually had the facilities director come and view. So I think that because they are doing research or they're doing work that has real life applications, it means more.

They're very concerned about doing a good job and getting the best information possible. It's not just, "Oh, I'm doing an end of term paper." It's, "The material I'm collecting, the research I'm doing, might have a final application that could happen here at KSU." So it means that very often the learning is deeper. They're more mindful about suggestions that they make because they want to do a good job. That would be, I think, a fairly good example of project-based learning.

TS: So you're teaching philosophy is to help students find an application to what they're doing, so that they remember a whole lot more than what they may have learned from reading books.

VSF: Right, the ability to connect the concepts and knowledge from the classroom to the real life application.

TS: The theory is important, but the application makes the theory a lot more relevant.

VSF: Yes, absolutely. You said it well (laughs).

TS: Well, that sounds like a great philosophy of teaching to me.

VSF: Thank you.

TS: Do you think that's typical at Kennesaw, or do feel like you are the Lone Ranger, or what?

VSF: No, I think currently there is a lot of interest in project-based learning. Our new dean, Dr. Shawn Long, just did a session about a week and a half ago where I think over fifty faculty members from my college, Humanities and Social Sciences, showed up for an all day workshop from 9:00 to 4:00 on project-based learning.

TS: Fantastic!

VSF: So I think there is a segment of faculty who are doing it already. I think there's a segment of faculty who are very interested in doing it. They see the relevance of it. So I think this is something that is up and coming, and I know that my new dean, Dr. Shawn Long, is super interested in it.

TS: I've met him several times. He seems like a very nice guy, and hopefully he is going to be a very successful dean.

VSF: I hope so as well. I was on the search committee, so I hope that we did a good job (laughs).

TS: I know that your former department chair, Susan Kirkpatrick Smith, praised you for your work as online coordinator for a while for your department of Geography and Anthropology and as associate director of Distance Learning for the College of

Humanities and Social Sciences. You've talked about this a little, but how did you become interested in online learning in the first place? I mean, as you mentioned, it's a very different animal than actually seeing the students face to face.

VSF: Yes, I actually wasn't sure if I would like it. I think I first dabbled in it more as an experiment to see how it worked.

TS: I've run into more people that got into it that way—that they didn't think they were going to like it.

VSF: Yes, because I love face to face so much. I love the interaction with students. I wasn't sure I would get the same kind of satisfaction in an online classroom. I was surprised that I did get that interaction in a very different way. Online teaching brings out students that you typically wouldn't hear from in a face-to-face class. The anonymity of that platform allows students that would not put their hand up in class to be able to say something.

TS: In online learning they almost have to.

VSF: Yes, because best practices for online learning are student-to-student interaction, student to professor interaction and then student to content interaction.

TS: I'm sure you know how much more work that is to be hearing from everybody.

VSF: Yes. The perception is that once you get an online course set up, you've done the majority of the work. In terms of presenting the content, that is true, but it is absolutely not true in terms of the interactive component. To do an online course correctly and to do it well, that continuous interaction with the student is very time consuming. I often find that teaching online is more time consuming than face to face. Face to face, you walk into a classroom, and especially if you've been doing it for a number of years, it is easier to convey the information to a mass of students. Online, you really have to think about and be very intentional about conveying information and giving the feedback that the students rarely want. I know that's one of the things that you look at in student evaluations: are you getting feedback? And feedback in an online course is really, really important for students to be able to course correct and make sure they have a successful outcome in the end.

TS: Sure, you have to. It sounds to me that maybe part of your teaching philosophy, at least subconsciously, with all your project-based learning, service learning, and internship projects, is to bring the best out of students. It may be time-consuming on your part, but how else do you bring out the best in students if you don't.

VSF: I agree.

TS: It is so much more than just standing up before a class and lecturing and walking out, and seeing them next week.

- VSF: Yes, it is a conscious decision, and it does take work and time, definitely.
- TS: Do you feel at all the tension between a university that is expecting more and more publications and scholarship and service and what have you and the time that you have to put into the classrooms to do it right?
- VSF: Absolutely. I think I've responded to that pressure by doing a couple of things. I still do disciplinary research, but I do also scholarship of teaching and learning. I would say that is in reaction to that pressure because scholarship of teaching and learning is a very intentional research into pedagogy and practices that you use in the classroom and looking at the impact it has on students' learning, and it is an acceptable form of research for us at KSU. Doing both types of research, applied research and scholarship of teaching and learning, allows me to make sure my research portfolio for promotion and tenure is strong enough. I'm still able to take what I've done in the classroom and put it into a research format, so that I can get published in peer review journals that have allowed me to then get tenured and then promoted.
- TS: I've noticed that you've been doing papers with Lynn Patterson from way back early in your career at Kennesaw on teaching Geography. I saw one that you did entitled, "Writing in Geography Classes: Faculty Challenges and Rewards" [*Journal of Geography* 2012]. Again, you are choosing more time-consuming work because you have to read and grade the student papers once they write. What did you conclude are the challenges and the rewards?
- VSF: That paper really focused from the faculty's perspective. So, yes, it is definitely challenging. It's more time consuming, but writing across the curriculum also teaches you that you can do short smaller pieces of writing that are not as high stakes. So you're not putting a huge grade on them. But you are having the students write, and you can almost pass, fail them. You're not putting a number grade on them.
- TS: Short papers on a specific topic?
- VSF: Exactly, where they're very assessing what they've learned very quickly.
- TS: Well, that was another paper you did with Lynn: "Writing in Geography: Student Attitudes and Assessment" [*Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 2012].
- VSF: Right. The first paper was about saying, "Look, there are rewards in doing this, and it doesn't have to be all labor intensive, but there are rewards in getting this kind of feedback from students very quickly."
- TS: So you interviewed faculty for that paper?
- VSF: It was from our perspective having gone through it. Then the other paper that you just mentioned was looking at a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the impact of this writing across the curriculum on students. Very few people had done quantitative

analysis on this. Qualitative analysis really shows that writing is good for students. It helps them feel more connected to the material. They have the perception of deeper learning.

TS: And what was the quantitative analysis?

VSF: The quantitative is actually looking at whether it makes a difference to their actual learning in terms of their grades, like assessing the materials, like doing tests. That is the one that really hadn't been done, and statistically no difference.

TS: Statistically no difference?

VSF: Right, no difference. However, on the qualitative spectrum, with statistical significance, they're saying, "Yes, I felt like it had an impact on my learning." To me, that says it is still meaningful, it's still important because if a student can say, "I feel like I gained a deeper understanding of the material because I did a writing assignment," whether it be a short one or a longer one, that's important.

TS: But it may not show up on the test if they aren't tested on what they actually learned.

VSF: Right, and that is to make sure there is a connectivity between the learning and the testing. Or maybe there are other factors that you haven't taken into consideration.

TS: Like, "I don't remember all the little details, but I really got a profound understanding of the field that I didn't have before."

VSF: Precisely.

TS: The journals sound pretty prestigious: *Journal of Geography* and *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*. One sounds very traditional, the other more teaching oriented maybe?

VSF: Yes. They both are very good journals. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* is based out of Europe and is a very difficult journal to get into. So we were very pleased particularly with that publication. So, yes, I like the fact that they are discipline journals. It's scholarship for teaching and learning, but also deeply rooted within my discipline. I feel like I'm making a contribution to my discipline in this area.

TS: All right. Well, we've run out of time for today. I hope to continue the interview at a later date.

Kennesaw State University Oral History Project
KSU Oral History Series, No. 161
Interview with Vanessa Anne Slinger-Friedman
Conducted, edited, and indexed by Thomas A. Scott
Part II – Thursday, May 16, 2024
Location: Kennesaw State University Archives, Sturgis Library

TS: This is the second part of an interview we started on March 4, 2020. We didn't quite finish the interview that day. We said we were going to come back together in about a week to finish up; then the whole university, the whole world, closed down for a COVID pandemic. Vanessa has done so much in the last four years that it's good to include what you've done in recent years. I thought we might begin by asking you to do a quick summary of your background. I know you're from Trinidad and Tobago, but you came to the U.S. to go to school at the University of Florida.

VSF: That's correct, yes.

TS: And you went all the way through at the University of Florida: a bachelor's in 1994, a master's in 1996, and a PhD in 2002. You changed majors once along the way, I guess, although it was all related, Latin American studies for the masters and back to Geography for the doctorate. We talked a lot in that first interview about your dissertation on ecotourism in a small Caribbean Island. Maybe it'd be well to get started today with your plans—when you decided, “I'm going to major in geography but do Latin American studies, and I'm going to go on for a doctorate,” and all of that. Eventually, by 2002, you're at Kennesaw State University. What were your plans as you were going along? And maybe talk about all the neat things you did in that graduate program that are relevant to what you're doing today.

VSF: Right. I think when I was going through my PhD program I envisioned that I would work for a development organization like the OAS [Organization of American States] or the World Bank. I even interned at the World Bank during my PhD. I think I envisioned going back home somewhere in the Caribbean. Even though I was born in Trinidad, I'm half Grenadian. And I researched in Dominica, an English-speaking Caribbean island. So, I envisioned being somewhere within the Caribbean Island chain doing development work. I came back after my PhD research. I had lived a year in Dominica, and I returned home, and I went to my cousin's wedding. I met the man I married, and we were married within ten months. I got two stepchildren along the way and have had a joint production.

TS: So, you had to come to the Atlanta area at that time?

VSF: I did. I did. So, that definitely impacted my trajectory in terms of what I perhaps thought I could do.

TS: That's interesting that you weren't planning on a teaching career.

VSF: Not necessarily. I had taught quite a bit at the University of Florida in my PhD program, and I enjoyed it very much. I actually had already, I think, begun considering it as a career, but tied to also doing development work. So, maybe doing consultancies with various organizations, maybe being a little more research-based and being placed down in the Caribbean a bit more and doing occasional teaching. I really didn't have that option when it boiled down to it in terms of helping my husband raise kids, because they were very small at that time. So, I shifted my trajectory because certainly I've been able to do international research. I didn't continue along the lines of looking at ecotourism, which had been the focus of my PhD research. I now do some research on Vetiver grass, which is a grass used for soil erosion control. And the focus is in Grenada.

TS: And what is Vetiver grass exactly?

VSF: It is not native to the Caribbean, but it has nativized. It's been in the Caribbean for so many centuries that it is considered to be a well-established species. It's not invasive. It doesn't spread. So, when farmers use it in the field, it doesn't compete with crops. The roots grow very, vertically down as opposed to horizontally. So, it's really good for shoring up soil and making sure you don't have soil erosion in fields on steep slopes, which Grenada is very steep. It's volcanic in origin.

TS: So, you encourage people to grow this kind of grass to prevent soil erosion?

VSF: Which is a major problem in a lot of Caribbean islands where they're volcanic in origin and they're super steep.

TS: Well, I'm wondering in this part of the country too. We've got so many hills and what have you for farmers that are out terracing to, I guess, accomplish the same thing to keep the soil from all rolling down the hill every time it rains.

VSF: Right. I think a lot of the times, particularly in the Caribbean, but other parts of the world as well, there's a tendency to think that more mechanized, more human made building structures are better for erosion control. So, people love to put up a wall. But for small-scale farmers, it's cost prohibitive. So, something like what they call a vegetative erosion control measure—they call it green erosion control. It's so much cheaper than putting up a wall, so that it's really cost effective for farmers. But also the tourism industry is using it because you'll see hotels that are on steep banks that they are saving their soil. It's good for coastal erosion, so the government is putting in some projects. Also, what's really amazing is that you can take the leaves and make handicrafts with them.

TS: Wow. Would it grow in North Georgia?

VSF: It would not. One of the projects that has come about since 2020 is the KSU Food Forest, which is a sustainable agricultural system, and I'm one of the cofounders of that project. The Food Forest has been at the KSU Field Station for four years. The first year I tried to grow vetiver grass there but Georgia gets too cold. In South Georgia, way south, there is a place where Vetiver has been grown. I think the concept still carries over where you

have areas that need preservation of the soil, but you would use something that's appropriate for that region.

TS: Sure. So, you were doing this for El Salvador?

VSF: For the World Bank. I learned about it in El Salvador and in Mexico and wrote a white paper for the World Bank on that. Then, for a couple of years, I was involved in various other projects. Then, it's come back around now to, I would say, within the past three years, I've been working quite consistently on it and working with a local NGO in Grenada on a United Nations grant where they have been distributing the slips, which are the vegetative material, so that farmers, crafts people, hotel owners, and residential owners, can all plant it and spread the Vetiver system, which is the way of growing it in contours, which basically allows the soil to be saved.

TS: Are the small farmers very receptive to this?

VSF: The people that see it and learn about it are extremely receptive.

TS: Wow. Well, I'm going to have to be careful not going in a hundred different directions, but your interests are so vast. You obviously care a lot about teaching. You're also interested in community service and scholarship. All of those things have fit together in your career.

VSF: I would say there are probably some major trajectories in the sense of my environmental focus and then my applied focus. My perspective is that the environmental focus hits on the ecotourism research, the Vetiver research. It hits on OwlSwap. It hits on the KSU Food Forest. It's all connected to sustainability and the environment.

Then, the applied focus—that's where my pedagogy comes into play. It's getting people involved in hands on application of learning. I can sit here and talk to you about Vetiver grass. You've learned about Vetiver grass. But then, if I actually took you into the field and went with you, and we planted some slips along a contour, and then we went back over time, and you saw what happened with the land, to me, that's the most effective way of teaching. It's actually doing it with somebody and then showing them the results of it. So, I would say that's something I can articulate much better now four years down the line from when we met in 2020, is that hands on applied learning piece. I was doing it back in 2020. I would say the projects that I'm currently doing are so well developed now and really highlight that pedagogy very strongly. So, that's the most exciting thing for me.

TS: So, maybe tying this all together, you're in the Atlanta area. I guess you were here even before you finished the PhD.

VSF: I had come up and I taught part time for one year at KSU.

TS: That's what I was going to ask because I've got 2002 for your doctorate. And I guess the year that you got the doctorate is the year that you were here part time.

VSF: Exactly, yes.

TS: The year 2002-2003, and then full time forever after.

VSF: Right, exactly.

TS: We talked about this in the first interview, but maybe your perspective has changed in the last four years. Why was Kennesaw a good fit for you in 2002, other than the fact that you needed a job and we were in the area?

VSF: While I was writing my dissertation, I needed to make money, and I applied and I got a part-time position here. Garrett Smith [associate professor of Geography in the Department of Sociology, Geography, Anthropology, and Criminal Justice], who retired quite recently in the past year and a half, interviewed me. I can remember as if it was yesterday. He interviewed me, and so at first it was I needed a job. I wanted to make sure my resume was progressing in the way it should be to be able to attract a tenure track job. And I really enjoyed Kennesaw. I really enjoyed the people I worked with. That was probably the biggest selling point for me. It wasn't entirely convenient because I live in Tucker, still do live in the same place, and I drive an hour to get to Kennesaw, give or take, depending on the day and the traffic.

TS: And coming to work on I-285 and what-have-you.

VSF: Right. Right. And when that [full-time] position went open, I knew that this is where I wanted to be. I did look at other universities. Nothing was exactly [what I wanted]. This was pretty much written for me in the sense that it was me, whereas the positions I sought at other universities that were in close proximity were not exact.

TS: So, describe what Kennesaw was that was perfect for you?

VSF: Well, the Geography and Anthropology Department [created in 2006 as a separate department] had the diversity of physical geography, human geography, and geospatial systems, so the technical side offering all of that. Georgia State [University] at that point was not as strong, was much more physical geography where I bridge the human environment interaction. I definitely have a strong human and cultural component in my expertise, not as much as the hard physical side. Hydrology and that kind of stuff is not my wheelhouse, but what we had here was. And also even the little bit of distance to Athens would have just been prohibitive for me to go that far. Again, I think when you work with people and you enjoy them, you weigh everything. And the ability to work with people that you enjoy has become a factor in obtaining that work-life balance.

TS: It sounds to me like you developed a whole lot of new courses after you got here.

VSF: I did, I did, Geography of Latin America and the Caribbean [GEOG 3370] and teaching climate change. Some were established before, but I developed them for myself to teach with Cultural Geography [GEOG 3340]. Resources, Society, and the Environment [GEOG 1125] is one that we developed from scratch here to teach with it for the gen ed [general education] component.

TS: So, you could come in as a young faculty member, and if we didn't have those courses, you could make the Geography Department what you wanted it to be, it sounds like.

VSF: To some extent; you're always guided by what everybody else wants.

TS: Yes, but at least you could develop the courses you wanted to teach.

VSF: Oh, definitely. That's one thing I've really enjoyed about teaching at Kennesaw. To a large extent, chairs are extremely supportive. Kennesaw is a college that's very supportive of the courses that you want to teach. Not always perfectly. I did apply for an Environmental Studies major. We have a minor. We don't have a major. And I did try to get the paperwork pushed through for an Environmental Studies major. That didn't happen. It got approved through my college all the way up through the university. But then the Board of Regents at that point...I think that the focus is much more on masters and PhDs right now.

KSU has an Environmental Science major in the College of Science and Mathematics. But we don't have an Environmental Studies [major in the Norman J. Radow College of Humanities and Social Sciences]. The Environmental Science is much more focused on the hard science, the biology/chemistry part. The Environmental Studies is much more on the human environment interaction, the more interdisciplinary. So, you can bring the fine arts, humanities, and the social sciences in as well. That was always the hope.

TS: Do you think that'll change in the future?

VSF: I hope so. I'm always optimistic. I will try again. I've tried twice now. Again, the local support is there. The support in KSU is there. But I think higher up in the Board of Regents the push is much more for masters and PhD.

TS: Four years ago in the interview, you described the Kennesaw that you came into as quote, "a teaching institution."

VSF: Yes. It has changed so dramatically. The whole process for tenure and promotion is completely different in my opinion. Now, the standards, the expectation, I think we're solidly in an R2 position right now with the expectations for the types of journals, the number of peer reviewed publications, and other scholarly outputs, presenting at conferences, etc. I think that has changed significantly.

TS: One of the things that we talked about in the first interview is, you did a lot of things in scholarship like the Vetiver grass and what have you but also scholarship of teaching and learning.

VSF: I did.

TS: I know in the Betty Siegel era [president, 1981-2006] there was a big push—if you lost touch with your field, you could at least do scholarship of teaching and learning. But you did some really top-class international papers on teaching and learning. In 2016 you got an award from the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia, a scholarship of teaching and learning award. And we talked in some detail in 2020 about the papers that you were doing with Lynn Patterson. Maybe talk about how you got into the scholarship of teaching and learning and how this award came about.

TS: Right. I think it comes back to my passion for applied learning, students doing hands on learning, because the learning is so much deeper. I think I just naturally teach that way. That's something I enjoy doing. And I was encouraged. We had a college dean who did a whole workshop on project PBL, Project-Based Learning in the Social Sciences and Humanities [Shawn Long in February 2020]. And when you receive that kind of encouragement from your administration, you realize, well, this is actually important. This is something they recognize as important.

For me, I was doing it anyway. I'm constantly taking students on field trips or taking them into the KSU Food Forest system where we're actually learning in a field, actually doing the things that we've just talked about in the classroom. So, to me, it was such an ingrained part of my pedagogy that it really made a lot of sense to document it, to see what impact it was having, and put that out in the world. Because if you think it's worthwhile, then maybe somebody else thinks it's worthwhile. So, you put it out there. I think that's where it came from that we at Kennesaw, at least at that point, and I would say still even today, recognize that kind of publication, that kind of scholarship. So, if you're going to do it, why not benefit and have it be disseminated out there?

TS: I've got a quote I am going to read to you. It comes from Ken Harmon when he was provost in 2016, I guess. You may have written this for him.

VSF: I don't remember ever doing something like that. But...

TS: My comment at the time was, I don't have a clue what he just said. Ken Harmon said, "Your systematic examination of online learning and teaching is grounded...." And by the way, we talked in the first interview about all the things you were doing with online learning. But, anyway, "Your systematic examination of online learning and teaching is grounded in a well articulated teaching philosophy, steeped in comprehensive multimedia cognitive theories informed by a constructivist approach."

VSF: Yes. I can explain all of that.

TS: Did you write that for him?

VSF: No. But he pulled it from a public paper of mine. He grabbed certain terms from a paper I wrote.

TS: I wonder if Ken knew what he said.

VSF: No, no. It's possible he didn't. So, systematic in that if you apply something, and then you measure the impact, and then you use that to inform how you are teaching, that's systematic. So, it's a feedback loop. You're not just shooting in the dark and hoping that it's working. You actually test that it's working. And if it isn't, then you make modifications, and you go again. So, it's systematic in that regard. And the multimodal, multimedia, cognitive skills relate to the kind of pedagogy that I'm doing. It's not just stand up in class and lecture. You're incorporating all different types of media into your teaching. So, it can be audiovisual, yes lecturing, and hands on. It's all the different aspects, and you're fully maximizing the experience that the students can have of learning something.

And I do think there is something to say for the way students learn differently. Some do great with you just standing up and lecturing. Some are going to be much happier if you take them into the field, and something's going to stick. If you have them in the classroom, maybe. If you're doing a bit of everything, but in a thoughtful, orchestrated, systematic way, then you're going to see what's working, cull out the things that don't work, keep the things that do, then change things up. So, I think that's my simplified version of it.

TS: So, what's a constructivist approach?

VSF: Constructivist teaching is based on where are they (students) are starting from. Right? People always say, "Are you student centered?" This term, student-centered teaching, is popular. So, understanding, "Where do the students start from? How are they learning?"—so that you can do it systematically, and you test along the way. "Are they really learning the material?" If not, then let's go back and see what else can work to help them learn.

TS: Well, that's quite an award to get it from the whole university system.

VSF: Oh, I was honored. I was really amazed. And then I got the teaching award for Kennesaw a couple years after that in 2019, which was fantastic. I mean, it's such a great honor to be recognized in that way, and I consider it one of the accomplishments of my career, both of those.

TS: Of course, you probably don't know why the committee makes the decision it does, necessarily. But it sounds like you're doing a whole lot outside the classroom as well as in the classroom with students. And, I'm just wondering, for instance, how significant OwlSwap was in getting the teaching award?

VSF: I couldn't tell you exactly what was the tipping point. Right? OwlSwap started in another professor's classroom. I would like to give him credit. Dr. Jason Rhodes.

TS: And he was also involved with the Food Forest.

VSF: Right, he was one of the co-founders along with me. We're both sustainability, environmentally-focused teachers. He had a class, the Geography of Clothing—understanding the fashion industry and how it has not just environmental impacts, but also societal impacts on the people who make clothes. We just put clothes on every day, and we don't really think about who made them, what kind of lives do they live. So, I think it was a semester of 2017 he taught that course, and the students on learning about the fashion industry said, "We want to do something about this. These things aren't okay with us now that we know them." So, they started a clothing swap.

I was there from the get go of that clothing swap where we basically had this event where students could bring up to ten items of clothing, switch them out for ten tickets, and then get ten items that were new to them. They weren't new items; all used clothing. At the end of that very small event, we had a pile of clothes left over. One of my strengths is perhaps administration. I've never gone for an administrative position in terms of a chair or dean, but administering a project is very much a strength that I think I have. It's within my bandwidth. So, I was the one who was like, "Okay. Let's find a space for that." I'm also very good at being persistent.

So, it went from a shelf to a little closet to now we have a room in Willingham Hall. It's an actual walk-in room, not quite as big as this room, but it's full of clothing. We have professional wear, a "dress for success" program, to wear at all the career fairs because students can't meet employers without being professionally dressed. So, we take racks to those events, and if they're not properly dressed, we can get them suited up quickly. We have everyday clothes. And...

TS: Is somebody in there to administer the exchanges?

VSF: Federal work study students work in the closets and at the events. The OwlSwap closets are open Monday through Thursday, 11:00 to 5:00, during the regular semesters. Then during summer, we're 11:00 to 4:00 because we don't have as much traffic on campus.

TS: So, anybody, student, faculty, anybody can walk in?

VSF: Students, faculty, staff. Yes. It's 100 percent free. All the clothes come in free because they're all donations. We have so many donations. Sometimes we have difficulty getting certain items that we need for professional wear. Especially, I don't think men donate clothes as much. They keep clothes for a long time, but we're always looking for certain sizes that we don't have.

TS: I'm still wearing suits from thirty years ago.

VSF: There you go. Which is great. You're very sustainable. Did you know that? I applaud you. It's not that we want people to get rid of their clothing. If they're using it, fantastic! But, yes, the OwlSwap closet is 100 percent free in, and 100 percent free out. Also, for three months each semester, we do a clothing swap event. On average, we have two hundred students show up to swap clothings.

TS: Because they want to swap and put on something new?

VSF: They want to swap, yes. And, it's usually on the campus green or in the University Center or we do them on the Marietta campus from time to time as well.

TS: But if we had some poor homeless student that walked in and didn't bring anything in, could he or she still get things to wear?

VSF: Yes. In the closet, you just walk in. If you want to donate, that's fine. But every day, a student could walk in and take up to ten items of clothing a day. We don't encourage overconsumption. That's not the concept behind it. But if the need is there, we do have students that absolutely this is savings for them. This makes a difference for their budget.

TS: How well is OwlSwap known on campus? Do all the faculty know about it?

VSF: No, no. We have an Instagram account at OwlSwap, and probably about 3,500 people are on it. One of the things that we lost after COVID was the KSU Today. I think that's what it was called, the email system for faculty and staff. OwlSwap lost a lot of faculty and staff attention during that period. We just got a new system back—"KSU Connect"—for communicating with faculty and staff between ourselves. That's how we promote all of our events, and we get a lot more staff out to events during that time. So, I'm hoping that I'll get a lot more awareness now that we have this new system back. I think a portion of students know. It's obviously a small percentage. I cannot figure out how we get more students to know. I think we're doing the right things. We're on the right social media. We do great events. Our events are well attended, but I think if we were known, we would probably have ten thousand plus people on campus.

TS: Do you work with the food pantry on campus?

VSF: So, we give free tickets to any KSU CARE [Campus Awareness, Resource & Empowerment] clientele. Any student who is a client there we give swap clothing tickets to so they can come to the monthly OwlSwap clothing swap events without having to bring items but be very discreet. They get the tickets beforehand. They can just say, "Oh, I have tickets from the last swap." They don't need to tell us anything. They can just come in. Also during COVID and since then, if we get any word about a student in need sleeping out of their car or in the ASCEND house, if they tell us they need a package of clothing, we'll get it to them. [Editor's note: ASCEND is a retention program created by CARE Services to assist students who experienced homelessness or the foster care system during their high school years].

TS: How do you involve your classes with this?

VSF: We have student positions. We do federal work-study. We have internships and directed applied research. So, those are all different ways students can connect and get a benefit from being involved. We have about six students per semester involved in the initiative. And then, Dr. Rhodes still does the Geography of Clothing class. So, he'll get his students involved in coming to the swaps.

TS: Oh, he's still here?

VSF: He's still here, yes. He's a senior lecturer now. So, yes, he'll get his classes involved. I do a class, Local and Global Sustainability [GEOG 3710], and they get involved in a lot of different areas across KSU related to sustainability. OwlSwap is one of them as well. I'm very excited to say that we did expand from one closet here in the Kennesaw campus. We've had a closet on the Marietta campus now for about two years, and we just got word this week that a high school is going to be a pilot for our first OwlSwap mini-closet in a high school, which means that we'll give them a setup kit of like a shelving unit and any clothing that they think they need. And educate them on the process—how do we run our closet? They're going to come in next week and see the OwlSwap closet firsthand. Then in August, they'll put together their own closet.

TS: Wow. This is the kind of thing that faculty need to know more about, I think.

VSF: Right. We actually did [in 2023] get some quite great recognition from AASHE, which is the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education. I wrote a case study, which was published in their publication. They picked five of the case studies to be recognized. Emory [University] won that award, but we were one of the five [AASHE Sustainability Award Finalists] chosen to be highlighted as the runners up, so to speak, which was a good recognition. [Editor's note: the other finalists were Duke University, Indiana University, and Nanyang Technological University in Singapore].

TS: For sure. I'm just thinking my wife is going through a ton of clothes now that she can't wear anymore. She's given half of the items to Saint Vincent de Paul and other charities. Maybe I need to tell her that about OwlSwap.

VSF: Absolutely. Absolutely.

TS: It seems like a great worthwhile project. You've been a faculty adviser to the Geography Student Club and the Caribbean Students Association. Could you talk about them?

VSF: Yes. I'm not currently in these positions currently. I stepped off last year as the Geography Club advisor, but I was in that role for five years. And then for CARIBSA, the Caribbean Students Association, I was in that role for sixteen years plus. It was a long time. I mean, for CARIBSA, the fact that I'm from the Caribbean, it was a little harder for that group to find someone to shift to for the advising role. After about ten

years I think it's always good for an organization to get a new person in there, someone who might be a little more invigorated, a little more excited at that point—new ideas. So, I was encouraging them for several years until they finally found someone who could replace me as a faculty adviser. That organization is still going strong, doing great. I follow them on social media. So, I know they're doing great.

The Geography Club is smaller. It's more disciplined focused. It's going strong as well, although in much smaller numbers. They get involved in events on campus, and they sometimes connect with events and students from the Food Forest. I encourage them to come out there and partake. We do a lot of volunteer activities and tours. Last semester, we had drone-flying out there and looked at 3D scanners. So, it's fun. You can do some neat looking at tools related to surveying and mapping with the students, which is much more relevant to them as a Geography Student Club.

TS: Great. Any other clubs that you've been involved with? Those are the ones I know about.

VSF: Yes. Those were the two main student clubs. Many people think that OwlSwap is a student organization, but it's not. It's a sustainability initiative. So, we don't fall under the RSO [Registered Student Organization] body there.

TS: Well, I think I told you I was going to ask you a Bill Hill question. [G. William] "Bill Hill [IV] was a psychology professor [and chair of the Psychology Department], but he was the head of the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning for a number of years [2000-2009] until he retired. And he always wanted me to ask people how they would define a master teacher.

VSF: I feel like we might have talked about this in our original interview. I'm sure you asked me before. Now answering it, if you ask me in four more years, it's going to shift as well, I think, because to me it should be a shifting thing. It should be something that you develop as you go along and you get more experience. There are so many things that have changed. If you think about when I first came to Kennesaw, there wasn't the online teaching. It's a totally different type of teaching, right? And to be a master teacher that teaches online is perhaps different from a master teacher who teaches face to face. So, it has to be an evolving definition in my opinion. I'm not avoiding the definition, but I do think it's something that's evolving. I think that therein lies that definition because a master teacher is somebody who should adapt to the circumstance of the students, of the content being taught and the technology that's available.

I could not have articulated that four years ago. I think COVID really changed that because, obviously, we all shifted to more online teaching. So, I think that makes me think differently about that definition of a master teacher. You do have to take all the circumstances into account. If you try to teach the same way in all of those circumstances, it's not going to be right. You really have to consider all the students, the topic, and the technology available to you. I think, obviously, you always want to be engaging, and that engagement is going to come in different formats depending if you're

meeting with them face to face or you're meeting with them online. I'm not very much one for just throwing material up. I think there has to be context for it, and maybe you have to guide students through the learning. So, I think that's important. And they recognize it. They know it. If they're not getting it, they know it. And you will hear about it in one form or another, whether it's your end of semester evaluation or just in the little bit of feedback you get.

I actually wrote a SOTL piece, Scholarship of Teaching and Learning piece, on using a feedback mechanism. These note cards, which your students would [fill out]. You can do this face to face or you can do this online. This holds for both, but when at the end of a class you say, "Tell me what you learned. What was the most interesting to you? What was the concept you had the most difficulty with?" That allows you to start the next class with, "Here are the challenges. Let me try and address them."

TS: So, this is your own student evaluation in a sense.

VSF: And you can have it as many times a semester as you want. Every single classroom, you can walk out and get that kind of feedback. Now, it's time consuming. If you think you have three classes and you have probably anywhere from 35 to 45 students per class, and you read them all, which I do, then that's a challenge. It's time consuming. So, the pedagogy is malleable to the professor, I think. I wouldn't stress anybody out by saying, "Oh, you've got to do it perfectly." I would say, "Do it enough that you're going to get useful feedback that you can use for teaching." But I think that is a great way to know what you're getting. You're hitting on the head. You're the hammer on the nail. You're getting it right. And then, "What do you need to fix the next time?" That's a good small exercise that I think works well in any classroom, face-to-face or online.

TS: Do any of the younger faculty come to you for advice on how to teach?

VSF: I do get some people come chat with me. This semester I did a peer review. I got asked by a relatively new faculty member. He's only been with us for about two years. And he said, "Would you come into my classroom and do a peer review evaluation?" Then, I think he was surprised at how much feedback I provided. I really did take the assignment seriously. My feeling is if he can get something out of it, great! I hope it is helpful.

TS: There's no wrong answer to that question, obviously, and all the answers are great that I've gotten over the years. I think part of what Bill Hill was always fishing for is in thinking of the concept of a master craftsman, and the apprentices come along who want to become master craftsman. They learn from the master craftsman. So, I think he was always interested in to what extent really good teachers on our campus have their own teaching disciples from the faculty that ask you, "What are you doing in your class, and how can we apply it to ours?"

VSF: Yes. I definitely have junior faculty that I've mentored over the years—probably four or five that I can think of that I've mentored. I just was thinking of another faculty member who recently was asking me about technology I use in the classroom. I thought it was

appropriate for something she was doing, and so I shared it with her. Then we had a discussion about it, and I realized, “That’s not what she should be using. VoiceThread, another type of technology, would be something that she could use.” So, I do have those discussions.

I did it formally for the college. I was an associate director for online learning. I did that for five years with Tammy Powell [Director of Distance Learning, College of Humanities and Social Science]. So, I’ve done some of that formally. I mean, as I’ve moved up through the ranks to be a full professor, I have been the leader on committees, etc. So, I think being nominated or being voted to do those tasks and also just stepping up to the plate because often nobody wants to do it unless you do it, or you need to step up—I think that’s been part of the territory.

TS: Yes. Just recently, you’ve won the 2023 Environmental Education Award from Keep Cobb Beautiful for “your exceptional dedication to sustainability in Cobb County.”

VSF: Right, which was a very pleasant and very big surprise.

TS: So, you had a big gala in December.

VSF: Yes, yes.

TS: That’s where they presented the award?

VSF: Yes. They had community awards for everything from businesses to all the cities: Keep Smyrna Beautiful, Keep Cobb Beautiful, Keep DeKalb Beautiful. And they recognize people who are doing work related to sustainability to helping the environment. They reached out to me and asked to come tour the KSU Food Forest. Part of the applied hands-on learning that I do with students is service learning. That means for a portion of their grade students do service learning anywhere from about ten hours a semester where they have to work with an organization in the community to do environmentally based work. It can be anything from cleanups to creating social media material for them. It can be anything that they’re comfortable doing that fits within their wheelhouse. They can relate it to their major, etc.

And so, I had students who volunteered there, and I think I had enough contact with them that they knew that I’m interested in helping Cobb County and working in the community. So, then I got invited to the gala. I just thought it was an invitation to come have a nice dinner and chitchat with people. And I got that award. So, it was very nice.

TS: Oh, you didn’t know you were going to get the award?

VSF: I did not.

TS: So, you went to dinner and got surprised?

VSF: I did. I did indeed.

TS: Oh, that's great.

VSF: It's a great honor. I was very pleased.

TS: We talked a good deal about the Food Forest, I think, in the earlier interview in 2020. But maybe some of that's worth talking about further. I guess part of the purpose is to show people in urban areas you can make a lot out of a small space and grow your own food in the median between the highway lanes, I guess, or whatever.

VSF: Yes. Well, gosh, wouldn't that be lovely if they allowed us to use the median between the highways? I could see some problems with that.

TS: Well, that's probably going a little far, but...

VSF: Right. But I think certainly the idea behind urban agriculture where you have, as you said, small spaces and also communities that don't get access to fresh fruits and nuts—nuts and fruits are a big component. And I think that getting away from the idea that it has to be a community's sole diet—the whole idea is to supplement the diet with food that is lacking, the type of nutrients that are lacking. So, again, the fresh fruits and the nuts; USDA-designated food deserts are found throughout the State of Georgia. I mean, even in our area in Kennesaw, there are food deserts. You know, by definition, that's areas where there's very limited access to fresh food.

So, if we can take a small piece of land—and I'm talking about one eighth of an acre, one third of an acre, someone's backyard, someone's front yard—it can be a small front yard or backyard—and put fruit trees in, so that during part of the year they can go outdoors, and they can pick a piece of fruit. Then, if they get enough, they can process it and have it throughout the year. So, obviously, you're not going to go out in the middle of winter and pick an apple. But you're going to get enough apples in summer that you can preserve them and have food throughout the year. So, that's really where the concept comes from is how could we develop a model, which is what the KSU Food Forest is at the Field Station. It's a learning, living lab where students can come out and see firsthand, "How do you build a system? What are the components of it?"

Then it can also be replicated in other parts of Atlanta, which is already happening. A sister organization, called Good Food Green City, run by Dr. Jason Rhodes, is already working with high school students in the area of Pittsburgh in Southwest Atlanta, where they've already put Food Forests in backyards and in the communities, like the church garden area. At the KSU Food Forest we have visitors. Now, because of how far along we are—because we're nearly four and a half years of this initiative—we get people coming from Chattanooga to see what we're doing. The City of Smyrna, Cobb County, people are coming in to see what we're doing here. So, that's very exciting.

TS: I'm going to read you a quote from yourself. This is what you said when you got the Environmental Education Award. I'll quote, "Sustainability is applicable to every academic discipline, every institution, and every business and is important because it underpins the use of resources and the output of waste over time and space, and with consideration of all people now and in the future to ensure survival and well-being."

VSF: Well, if you think about disciplines that we have here at KSU, when you think of the environmental focus, more people immediately think of environmental science. They think of the environment outdoors. And that's an easy fit, right? But what if you had a marketing degree? Then you could teach students about sustainability within making products, within selling products. We have the concept of greenwashing, which is where businesses try to describe their product using green terms, but it's really not a product that's good for the environment.

So, if you integrated the idea of sustainability into a marketing discipline or business discipline, maybe we come out with students who went into businesses and were at least thoughtful about how their product is made and how it impacts the workers and then also the impact on the people that are using their product. It's the idea that it's not just about the environmental scientists or the geographers of the world. It can be marketing, it can be social media, or it can be pretty much anything. I mean, I think about in the KSU Food Forest. One time I went out there, and I found, the KSU dance students out there doing dances over the Food Forest. And I thought, "Well, how wonderful!"

TS: Yes.

VSF: I mean, there's applicability in nature for every kind of major. Certainly, you can have the literature students out in nature talking about the environment. I mean, one of the major contributors to the environmental movement wrote the book, *Silent Spring*, by Rachel Carson [1962] and that had such an impact on environmental law. So, I think that every discipline should integrate sustainability in order for us to live better with our environment.

TS: Maybe, as a way to conclude, talk about how Kennesaw has changed over the years. I know that as time has gone on teaching hasn't gone away, hopefully, but...

VSF: Not at all!

TS: Scholarship—[job applicants] have to have a research plan of what they're going to do before they get hired nowadays. So, talk about how Kennesaw has changed now that we're a R2 (Research 2), and how that's affected you. You mentioned in the first interview that a lot of people were frustrated by the change, the speed of change here.

VSF: Yes.

TS: They were hired to do one thing, and all of a sudden, they're expected to do something else.

VSF: Yes.

TS: That's been part of the history of Kennesaw since the beginning, by the way, that expectations keep changing.

VSF: I've been here long enough that I've definitely learned that is just something that happens. And to some extent, I think you either adapt or you move on.

TS: Well, I was going to say that I think you've adapted very well to the change.

VSF: Yes, I think I have. I've had my moments of, I guess, doubt or kind of panic maybe, just to make sure I'm on the right trajectory.

TS: You're still doing these kinds of things?

VSF: Absolutely. Absolutely. I'm thrilled to say that I've had many students go off and work for the Georgia Department of Natural Resources or for environmental non-governmental organizations, for Southface [Institute] in Atlanta, which is an organization that does sustainability in the built environment—homes and commercial centers; that's how they build things. They're out there having an impact. These students are actually practicing what we've taught them, and they're so passionate! They're so excited about doing it, and it's thrilling to have had them as students.

TS: I asked [KSU President Kathy S.] Kat Schwaig once whether the goal was to become an R1, and she basically said, "Not during my presidency."

VSF: Really? Really? Sometimes I feel like we're watching this happen right now.

TS: Well, that's what I wanted to ask you. Do you think that's where Kennesaw is going? Because we've been evolving for the last sixty years.

VSF: Yes. I think that perhaps they do have the goal of us being a top tier R2 first. But what's the next step right after that? Right? I mean, why do you march to be the top tier R2? Because you want eventually to be an R1. I do think that the amount of funding that's coming in these days, it's an absolute requirement for tenure and promotion to get at least some small internal funding, but some external as well. I don't know the numbers. I'm sure somebody in the Office of Research could provide those. But I think that what you would see is a very clear and steep trajectory upwards of the kind of funds that professors are bringing in. And I think that's a major requirement of an R1 that you are actually progressing in the amount of external research funds that you're bringing in. That's definitely happening.

I would say a very large number of my colleagues in Geography and Anthropology could be working in R1 institutions. I mean, the fact is that there are not enough tenure track jobs anywhere, even in the United States, to give everybody a tenure track job, far less in

an R1 university. I am just amazed at faculty and colleagues that I have! I anticipate that one day, I don't know how long it will take, but I do think KSU will eventually become an R1 university, even if it won't be in the timeline of current KSU President, Kat Schwaig.

TS: There was a time when we had a number of people who had come from R1s because they didn't want to be in an R1. They wanted to be in what Kennesaw was twenty-odd years ago when you came here.

VSF: Yes. I do feel sad. I came here partly because of that, because I did love teaching so much that I did like the idea of being in a place where the focus was on teaching. But I also think it's thrilling to be involved in all the aspects of the job. So, I wouldn't leave any of the aspects behind. I like doing it all. And I think that if you are smart about it at KSU, that even if you don't have a very hard focus on research, that there's a way still to go through all the ranks of tenure and promotion while being involved in research in different ways. Like you mentioned the SOTL, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, or even case studies as opposed to maybe doing quantitative and qualitative study research. You can do case study approaches. So, I do think there are enough recognized paths to tenure and promotion to becoming an associate professor and full professor that you just need to be working at it here at KSU to achieve it.

TS: So, it sounds like you're still happy at Kennesaw.

VSF: Yes, I am. I'm probably more excited because of the two initiatives, the Food Forest initiative and OwlSwap. And yes, we definitely could be better known, but there are things happening there. I'll tell you, for instance, I don't think that Kat Schwaig as president of KSU knew that OwlSwap existed till last year. I happened to sit next to her during a lunch—I got invited to a lunch—and I sat next to her. I told her about OwlSwap. And she came to visit after a month. She said to me at the end of lunch, "I didn't know this existed. I would like to come see it." And she came to visit about a month later, and I got resources to help with the closet.

UGA [University of Georgia] has a closet like this. It only gives professional wear, no day-to-day wear. And students are only allowed to check out [a limited number of] outfits per semester. But, our closet is much more. The fact that it's open four days a week, students can come check out up to ten items of clothing. It makes it very accessible. It's very unique in the programming that we do, the recycling, mending, and upcycling [transforming useless or unwanted materials into something of value]—the programming for different units across KSU, the fact that we're at all the career fairs. We have a very unique initiative here that is really about addressing students that may not have those resources that they need for their success.

I mean, if we're all about getting students through here, picking up the skills that they need to be able to go off and have a great job and be successful in finding that job, these are necessary resources, I think, in this day and age. So, I think that makes us unique to have this. And I think she recognized that, and that's why shortly after that, I was able to

get a resource person to help me. It's a position that was created—living learning lab coordinator. That person works within the Office of Sustainability, but lends time to me to help coordinate the initiative. So, those projects are what make me excited about getting up and going and doing the work at Kennesaw.

TS: Well, I'm out of questions. Is there anything you would like to talk about that we haven't talked about?

VSF: I don't think so. I think we touched on the main things. I would say the biggest things are OwlSwap and the Food Forest that have come up in the past couple of years. I would say maybe these could be my parting words: my goal is that when I retire from KSU, which may be in a couple of years, although I don't want to put a timeline on it, would be that I leave these two initiatives, particularly OwlSwap and Food Forest, in a position where they are maintained at the university. Even though I've been so heavily involved in administration, the goal would be that they are maintained, that they become so much a part of KSU that it doesn't matter if I'm gone. They'll hopefully be important enough to stay here and be maintained. That the closet will have its own value, and there'll be a way for it to always be a resource for students. And that the KSU Food Forest will continue to be an important initiative for the Office of Research that they think it's worth maintaining that initiative as well.

TS: I was just thinking that, of course, I've been retired for a while, but it's been at least ten years since I've been out to the KSU farm.

VSF: You should come out. You'd be amazed at the kind of research going on out there. It's great! Very exciting stuff! Containerized mushrooms. We have one of the top forensic anthropologists in the state who works for KSU, Dr. Alice Gooding [assistant professor of Anthropology]. She's amazing. She has a body farm out there, not human bodies. Piggy bodies. She trains Cobb County PD (Police Department) detectives [and other law enforcement professionals at the Georgia Public Safety Training Center in Monroe County], in forensic anthropology and clandestine body [grave] recovery. So, it's just an amazing educational.

TS: Maybe you'll hold an open house out there someday and invite all the faculty.

VSF: Well, we do have Friday in the Food Forest once a month during the semesters. And I will have one over summer. I'll shoot you an email. I'll let you know so you can come out. During that, we don't just focus on the Food Forest, but we tour the entire Field Station, and we let everybody know about all the different research going on out there. So, that's kind of our open house. I look at it almost like a service to KSU. They're not my research projects, but I have myself and my team learn about all of them, so that we can tell the public about them.

TS: Great. Well, thank you very much.

VSF: My pleasure.

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