



# SAAFON

## A CONVERSATION WITH SAAFON'S EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, DR. JAHİ CHAPPELL

SAAFON celebrates a milestone with our new Executive Director. At almost a year in, learn more about Jahi and read reflections from the SAAFON team.

### Jahi's Road Before SAAFON

Jahi comes to SAAFON with a PhD in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology from the University of Michigan. Previous career highlights include positions as an assistant professor of environmental science and justice at Washington State University Vancouver (WSUV), Associate Director of WSUV's Center for Social and Environmental Justice, and Senior Scientist and Director of Agroecology and Agricultural Policy at the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP). At IATP, he spearheaded an open letter to the Secretary-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations that helped to solidify the FAO's commitment to agroecology. His work with farmers, non-profits, research and academia are at the cross section of agroecology, the right to good food, and environmental sustainability. A major focus of his work has been to support the construction of participatory, socially just, ecologically sustainable agrifood systems that serve and support all members of society.

In 2018 Jahi wrote and published *Beginning to End Hunger: Food and the Environment in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, and Beyond*. In this book Jahi explores one of the world's most successful food security programs, where work with local family farmers shows how food security, farmer livelihoods, and healthy ecosystems can be supported together. In his book, Jahi establishes the importance of holistic approaches to food security, suggests how to design successful policies to end hunger, and lays out strategies for enacting policy change. With these tools, we can take the next steps toward achieving similar reductions in hunger and food insecurity elsewhere, and eventually, everywhere.

But that's some of who Jahi is on paper. Let's learn more about the person himself, and how and why he has become part of the SAAFON family.

### Mrs. Cynthia Hayes, Mentor and Compass Star to Jahi

*"He (Jahi) already had a strong interest in SAAFON on his own, long before joining the organization...he had really strong board support with his candidacy...I see great hope in terms of SAAFON's development with Jahi as E.D. for the staff and the farmers that we serve." - Dr. Owusu Bandele, SAAFON Co-Founder*

Long before joining SAAFON, Jahi had a connection to it through Ms. Cynthia. Jahi says:

"Ma' Cynthia... was a unique and important mentor for me. I think I might first have heard about SAAFON, and the work of her and Baba Owusu (Dr. Owusu Bandele) around 2010. Since I had worked for 8 years on international sustainable agriculture issues at that point, but not very much on sustainable agriculture in the US, I was incredibly excited to see an organization working with Black, sustainable farmers. You know, it was just thrilling to hear about since so often Black and Brown people are portrayed as uninterested in the environment...I emailed Ma Cynthia in 2010 expressing my excitement and interest in her work – and she graciously emailed back...little did I know that this was a step in a chain of events that would change my life and lead me here!

She told me 'I'm happy to talk to you whenever you'd like, and to offer any help and experience I can around Black farming. There aren't that many of us in this space, and so I'm very interested in supporting you.'

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In the years since, I've realized more and more what a unique gift Ma Cynthia offered me. Here was someone involved in so many spaces and efforts—for just one example, beyond her role in leading SAAFON, she and I worked together a little bit on the Diversity efforts of the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition—but she was that incredibly rare mentor who actually called ME if she didn't hear from me for a couple months. And when I called her, if she was busy, she immediately scheduled a time to follow-up. I can count mentors like that on one hand. What a rare gift!

So Cynthia has really been my most profound mentor in learning about, allying with, supporting Black farmers in sustainable agriculture—in the national and international scene, there really had been precious few Black people who were recognized. Cynthia was one of an important cohort, and one who really gave of herself to mentor me and bring up my understanding in this area.”

## **A Passion for Working With Farmers**

“I'm dedicated to creating a world where we protect and enhance the dignity of the natural world AND the people in it. Agriculture and food have been called the most profound way people interact with the environment – we are literally taking the natural world into our body and turning IT into OURSELVES, as our food BECOMES what makes up our body. Farmers, particularly Black and Indigenous farmers, have known this for time immemorial. So protecting, elevating, honoring that work has become central to my work. The only way to a better system, one that honors both the Earth and all of its living things, including people, is for the production of food and agricultural products to be recognized as an honored profession, one deserving of dignity, as part of a society that makes it economically, culturally, socially, and environmentally sustainable to be a producer.”

## **Making the South His Home**

“The South is an important ancestral home for so many Black folks. My family can trace back some of its roots to Kentucky, to Alabama, and to Texas. Many in the previous generations of my family were part of the Great Migration of Black people from the South to look for opportunity and jobs in the North. And in the North and Midwest, where I grew up, there is so much ignorance of what the South is actually like – for good and for bad, in all of its complexity, but also as a place so many of us have tried to make home for generations. So many traditions, culture, knowledge, history of African Americans come from how our ancestors adapted and protected their knowledge and wisdom from Africa, and the ingenuity and creation they had to show in surviving the forcible diaspora. So I'm drawn both to the South as a cultural and historical center of Black power and knowledge, and—having traveled a good bit around the world—drawn here to get to know a place that I am ancestrally connected to. After having visited so many other places where I really don't have roots, the South feels like coming home.”

## **Strong Family Roots and Connections to Farming**

“My mother's father, Benjamin Franklin Brown, Sr., bought a farm in order to know that he could provide for himself and his family. So little did I know it, but when I was eating fresh blueberries from my grandparents' farm as a kid, I was enjoying the fruit of Black food sovereignty before it was even called food sovereignty. The blueberry farm in western Michigan where my mother and her seven siblings were raised was the result of my grandfather's decision that he needed a secure way to provide food for his family. He was a veteran of World War II, and a factory worker, and he realized that as a young, Black factory worker with a seventh-grade education, his ability to provide for his family depended on the fortunes and whims of a factory, of a larger society, that would not hesitate to use and abuse laborers of any color, and certainly not least of all, his color. And so when he was able to, he and my

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Grandmother scraped together enough to buy a family farm, knowing that even if he lost his job, he could provide his family with good food that they grew themselves...a part of me was very literally made on that farm through the food my mom and her family grew, sold, and ate. So I like to think that part of the charge I take up now comes down to me from my Grandpa and Grandma Brown. Grandpa not only took up farming himself, but encouraged other Black folks to take it up to make sure they had such food sovereignty to rely on, as well.”

## Why SAAFON?

“I feel called to come back, to focus on the United States and Black folks and our legacy here, to help build systems to support our own agriculture, our own knowledge and wisdom, and honor the work of my ancestors. SAAFON is unique not only in being one of a small number of groups dedicated to Black Agrarianism, which resonates with today’s strong international movements for sustainable, dignified agriculture in right relationship with the earth and all that’s in it – it also brings together what has been called the “science, practice, and movement” of agroecology. Agroecology looks to work with the ebbs and flows of the natural world and lift up cultural values and practices that allow us to generate food, fiber and fuel together with the earth. SAAFON is doing this in the context of the Black American experience. It really feels like the place that I was meant to continue my mission and carry on the legacy of my ancestors, including Grandpa and Grandma Brown.”

## Preserving SAAFON’s Legacy

“Ma Cynthia was one of my most important mentors. She invited me to a strategic planning meeting in 2016, shortly before she transitioned, where a group of her farmers, advisors, [former SAAFON Executive Director] Tamara Jones, and her co-founder Baba Owusu helped lay out the next phase of SAAFON. She saw that it needed to take the steps to extend beyond herself, to make that sure her life’s work with Black farmers in the Southeast would continue. I will be doing all I can to listen to Ma Cynthia’s voice and experiences: to listen and learn from our farmers, to lead by following their voices and wisdom; and to keep the priority on serving their vision and the power of Black Agrarianism. Ma Cynthia was very adamant that if something didn’t serve SAAFON’s farmers – like a conference I invited her to that she declined to attend! – then we shouldn’t be doing it. At the same time, just as she extended herself to mentor me, it will be important to remember that while something might not directly serve our farmers in the moment, it doesn’t mean that we can’t be clever and conscious about how to find what WILL move our work forward, that will extend our connections, and realize opportunities that might be hidden.”

## SAAFON’s Potential and Possibility

“I’m really looking forward to spending more time with our farmers, to continue learning from them what SAAFON’s potential and possibilities are. SAAFON’s board and staff have already done an immense amount of work in enunciating our values and vision – centering the facts that race and place matter; that Black land ownership and collective stewardship are crucial to our future as a people; and modeling and amplifying the ways that Black farmers can live and produce in right relationship with the land, and each other. I believe SAAFON can help our farmers lead a rural renaissance through Black farms. Three foundations of that will be:

1. Boosting Black farmer power, leadership, and voice through direct support for their capacity-building, knowledge and wisdom exchange, and collectives.
2. Fostering a renaissance of Black Agrarianism through co-designing viable lifeways for Black farmers in the Southeast, based on wisdom new and old. This means amplifying intergenerational exchange of knowledge, land, culture, memory; and finding creative and transformational ways for Black farmers to ensure the ecological, social, and economic viability of their farms and families.
3. Foregrounding the growing Black American voice in national and international conversations around the future of food and agriculture, particularly within the agroecology and food sovereignty movements. Making sure AFROecology has a seat at all of those tables.”

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## Reflections from the Team

*“It is healthy and normal that SAAFON is going through transitions and is entering a new era...welcoming it is part of our collective story.”* – Whitney Jaye, SAAFON Director of Strategic & Programmatic Development

*“What really excited me about Jahi is his ability to deeply listen, his ability to observe and listen before entering community. His desire for honesty and transparency in our conversations...that sets the stage for everything to bloom.”* – Alsie Parks, Director of Field Organizing

*“We have a sense of relief in having somebody who is so skilled and well-read in these movements around agrarianism and agroecology globally and somebody who has not only a deep desire to be a part of this work but to embody the values of SAAFON...someone with all of these qualities is inheriting the leadership of this organization.”* - Whitney Jaye

*“... that synergy of skills and experience and energy is vital...one of the most exciting things about Jahi’s leadership is that he doesn’t believe in building things that aren’t sustainable and being able to assess and evaluate things to ensure that sustainability of what we are building is built in to our operations and programs and relationships.”* - Alsie Parks

*“The transition gives us hope...I’m excited to see what becomes part of the story.”* - Avery Jackson, SAAFON Storyteller & Communications Coordinator

*“With Jahi coming on, his specific skill set and what he is bringing to the collective, the humility that he brings to the work speaks volumes for just how much potential and impact SAAFON can have on its communities...and we are ready to get it done and do a better service.”* - Jason Lindsay, Farm Practices & Resource Coordinator, North Carolina

*“He (Jahi) brings a lot of knowledge in place...he has a mindset of balance...he brings so much to the table...we want to let that light that he has truly shine because there is some brilliance that is truly there.”* - Dr. Cindy Ayers Elliot, Board Treasurer

*“He (Jahi) is very receptive, very open...the transition has been great, he’s a great listener, allowing us to be creative...working with him so far has been a breath of fresh air.”* - Tammy Harris, SAAFON Agroecology & Education Resource Coordinator, Georgia

*“(Jahi) joining our team has filled in a missing piece...someone who is there dedicated to coordination, thought leadership and support...I’m very pleased to see that Jahi is willing to accept the culture and politic (of SAAFON)... I appreciate his directness and his surety in how he moves about things, it is a quality that is sorely needed in stewarding the organization.”* - Noah McDonald, SAAFON Research and Land Work Coordinator

*“I think that Jahi as a leader, but also by what he’s experienced learning from farmer and peasant struggles across the globe, is that there are fundamental things about land-based people, agrarian people and farmers that translates across geographies, experiences and cultures and because he’s been able to learn and observe and take part in farmer and peasant movement struggles beyond the context of the U.S South, there’s so much to complement the experiences of the current membership and current team.”* - Alsie Parks

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