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SHIRLEY SHERROD INTERVIEW
OBAMA: IN PURSUIT OF A MORE PERFECT UNION
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Shirley Sherrod
Georgia Director, Rural Development, USDA
January 18, 2019
Interviewed by Peter Kunhardt
Total Running Time: 53 minutes and 9 seconds

START TC: 01:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Shirley Sherrod

Georgia Director, Rural Development, USDA

2008 presidential election

01:00:15:16

SHIRLEY SHERROD:

Oh, my goodness. I will never forget the night of the election. You know, you worked so hard—when I first tried to wri—the—the whole summer of 1965 up till when the Voting Rights Act was passed, I went every week to the courthouse to try to register to vote and the—and the sheriff was pushing me back out of the—out of the courthouse. I could not register. So to go from not being able to register to vote to finally being able to register to vote after the Voting Rights Act passed, and then to work with our people to get us to understand what it means to register and to vote, and then seeing President

Obama being elected as president, I—my husband and I both—we just cried that night because we didn't think it would happen during our lifetime.

Childhood under Jim Crow

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SHIRLEY SHERROD:

Oh, my goodness. We were living under Jim Crow laws, and I was living in Baker County just down the road and we had a sheriff who—who—his name was L. Warren Johnson, but he wanted to be known as the gator, as in alligator because he would make a sound like an alligator to scare people. He had killed a number of Black people. You couldn't ride through the county without being stopped. And back in the 60's, I think around '67 the Atlanta Journal Constitution estimated his take on the road, not that that he was turning in, but his take on the road to be about 150,000 dollars. So living, going to segregated schools and living under the condition we lived under, you know, it was just something I wanted to get away from.

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I wanted to get away from work on the farm because I didn't like picking cotton and doing all of that work, and I wanted to get away from the south because I thought back then, I thought people in the north were free. So my goal was to leave this area because it was so difficult for us during those years.

Joining the Civil Rights Movement

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SHIRLEY SHERROD:

My father was murdered by a white farmer who wasn't prosecuted. There were witnesses, but an all-white grand jury refused to indict him, so on the night of my father's death—I'm the oldest of—what—my mother was pregnant when my father was murdered. My—there were five girls, so I was the oldest of five girls at that time, and my father wanted a son so bad he convinced my mother to try one more time for this boy. So I'm a senior in high school and my mother's pregnant. It was one of the happiest times for my father.

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The oldest was about to go away to college. He's told everyone that that baby was the boy. He didn't live to see him. He was—he died on March 25th, 1965, and my brother was born on June 6th, 1965. And I graduated from high school on June 6th, 1965. But I made a commitment on the night of my daddy's death. I felt I needed to do something. As the oldest, I felt I needed to do something. I didn't feel I could go and get a gun to try to find this man to kill him. That wasn't the upbringing I had had. But I had to do something, and I can remember that night as our house filled with people who were coming to comfort us. I went into one of the bedrooms that—we had just moved into a

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new home. I was just praying and asking God to help me, I needed to do something.

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And the thought just came into my head, you know. You can give up your dream of - of living in the north. You can stay in the south and devote your life to working for change, and I can remember a calmness just came over me at that point. I wasn't involved in the civil rights movement. The movement had been going on in Albany at least four years before then, but I just—I accepted that that's what I was gonna do, didn't know how, and things just began to unfold. We started the civil rights movement in Baker County in June, and it's never been the same since. My mother became the first Black elected official there. We've just—the—the county changed. We faced the gator and we won.

Cross burning after father's death

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SHIRLEY SHERROD:

We had been marching and we had actually gone to Washington where representative Conyers had held some hearings about Baker County and so forth. So this was in September now. I had actually left to go to school at Ford Valley State and received a call. My mother, my young brother who had been born in June, and my sisters were there in the house. One of my sisters was sitting in the dining room studying and saw all of these cars coming down the

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road. You're way out in the country so it was unusual, so she went into the bedroom where my mother was to say that there were all of these cars.

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And she said, "Oh they're probably going to—"she named one of the neighbors, Warren Lee's house. But then the next thing they saw was this cross being burned. And—and um you know, my mother went out on the porch. She had a gun in her hand, and she's telling them because of all of the light from the fire she's recognizing some of these people there and calling out their names. Now one of my sisters got on the phone and started calling some of the Black men in the area 'cause we—of course the civil rights movement had been going on since June so everyone was on alert and what actually happened that night is that these Black men came through the woods and had actually surrounded these white people who were there burning the cross.

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Could've been a really big blood bath that night. And they talked some of the young—younger Black guys into not shooting, but they allowed these men to leave. The sheriff of course showed up shortly after that and we knew nothing would ever, ever happen as a result of his being there.

"We knew who we were dealing with"

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SHIRLEY SHERROD:

You know, they would harass us. We would attend meetings, mass meetings, and—and they would—the police or the sheriff's—see, the sheriff had his sons as deputies and they would stop us and shine lights all in the cars, but we knew during those years that we—you just didn't have one car going off by themselves, you would—we would ride in groups during those years. We—we had—we knew we had to be careful, we knew who we were dealing with. We were dealing with gator Johnson, and he didn't mind killing people and it seems the federal government, state government or no one else was interested in dealing with.

Coming from a family of farmers

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SHIRLEY SHERROD:

Now, that was what we knew to do—my—my grandmother's family—actually I don't know where they came from, but I know that they were in Baker's County in the 1870's and they worked together to sharecrop and buy land and did a great job of buying—helping each family member buy land, probably as much about 4 or 5,000 acres all together, so I was always surrounded by—by landowners and family. We made our living there. My grandparents educated their children from there and that's what my father expected to do with his children as well. We were a tight community.

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SHIRLEY SHERROD:

I mean there is not a day that I don't think about my father and—and the things he taught me and the things I wish I could have shared with him through the years. I also think that hopefully he's proud of what I've been able to do, the fight that I've waged all—waged all of these years to try to help make things better.

Being married to Charles Sherrod

01:09:20:04

SHIRLEY SHERROD:

People ask me, "How did you meet your husband?" I actually met him at our home. He met my family before he met me and you know, of course his civil rights was his work—his ministry. He's—he's—he's a graduate of Virginia Union Theological Seminary and Union Theological Seminary in New York, but he chose to do his work here in the south. So if you're married to Charles Sherrod, civil rights is part of your work. You know, it's—it's what you have to do, it's what I wanted to do too, and I'm sure that's what attracted me to him because I had made a commitment to stay and work. And I could see how working with him, I could live true to that commitment.

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So, we've been in some dangerous situations through the years. At one point a group of white men came to the house and set it on fire with me in it. And there were many other times when you wondered if- if this was it. In fact, that evening when they had set the house on fire and we couldn't stay there anymore, we were driving out of Albany to go to Baker County to my mother's house and just a few miles out, we had a flat tire. My husband, even today, changing a tire is a challenge. See I grew up on the farm, it's just what you have to learn to do. So we're sitting there and I'm waiting on him. Ok, we gotta make some kind of move here. And a truck drove up and pulled in behind our car. And it's two white men, and they were clearly drinking.

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Now what they didn't do was, they didn't recognize him and they actually changed our tire that night, so where we thought ok, this could be it, you know, good came out of even that.

Black farmers faced opposition

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SHIRLEY SHERROD:

When—and during the summer of '68 when we were trying to develop answers for people being put off the land owned by white farmers because they were participating in the movement, that's when we sent people to Israel to study the Kibbutz and to look at how they were resettling their

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people. And they came back, we started putting this together, the organization, and realized land was available in Lee County, Georgia, and with the help from groups around the country, put together some quick financing to put an option on the property. And then the OEO, the Office of Economic Opportunity was doing a lot then. So they actually gave us a planning grant to plan this community.

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It was a direct grant from Washington though, so once white people in the area knew we had the land, then their goal was to make sure we were never successful at doing what we wanted to do there. So, they started working politically to make sure we didn't get any more money out of the government. We had been promised by OEO they would give us a substantial amount of money to help get the community started. There were to be three villages. We worked out the farming area and how we would farm, the-- where industry would be located. We had a railroad spur--a railroad that went on through the land with a spur. We just planned the whole thing. By the time that year of planning was over though, Lester Maddox and white people in the area had gotten together.

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They entered into the congressional record that we were communist, and then OEO, where they had promised to give us a direct grant, politically they didn't feel they could do it so they said we had to go back through the normal

process, and that's when the local people and Lester Maddox blocked all federal money coming into the state to our--our project.

Obama's 2004 DNC speech and his run for presidency

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SHIRLEY SHERROD:

I was very proud of--of the person that I heard and very, very hopeful that you know, some new young Black leadership was- was coming forward. I just didn't think it would happen during my lifetime. I was hopeful, but really didn't think it would happen. I didn't think this country was at the point where it could happen. That's why--I mean, that's why we cried that night. You know, to believe that we were turning--we had turned a corner here. You know, we didn't realize it could also set us back, but we thought this was a turning point for us in this country.

"A More Perfect Union"

01:14:41:12

SHIRLEY SHERROD:

I thought he--I thought it was a good speech. I thought it could have gone a little more-- a little further than he actually did but I realize he had to walk a thin line. But you know, it's what we had to do ever since we've been in this country. It's--it makes it difficult to be who you are.

The first Black Director of Rural Development in Georgia

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SHIRLEY SHERROD:

Let me say, the first attempt to try to get me into a position at the state office happened during the Clinton Administration, but at that time Sam Nunn stood in the way and so it didn't happen. So here we were 15 years later, and folks wanted to—to see that effort again. I didn't think it would happen. So, I said ok when I was contacted but I didn't think it would happen, so I was totally surprised when I got the—the call from the White House, saying I had been chosen. I can remember the young man talking to me and—and I was—I wasn't—I didn't respond right away to something. He said, "You're still gonna do it, aren't ya?" Well, my mind had already gone to, gosh I've got to go find a place to stay in Athens.

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And you know, he's telling me, "We want you to show—show up, up there. Just drop in in a couple of weeks and within three weeks be on the job." So there's a lot I had to put in place. So my mind was already there 'cause when I make a decision to do something, I'm—I'm giving it every effort I have. I was chosen as Georgia State Director of Rural Development. No person of color had ever been in the position before at the state office level, and during the years when we had New Communities, there was only one Black person in

the state office of Farmers Home Administration, so it was a wall we needed to break through, but I wasn't so sure it would happen. But to get that call to say hey, you've been chosen is like, wow, I've worked in rural Georgia all of my life. I know the issues here; I know the things that I really need to try to push to try to get some of that money that's been there that only a few people have been accessing in the way that they should to try to get it out into areas where people really needed it and qualified for it.

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The Georgia State Director, there—there are state directors for 50 states in the country, so the Secretary of Ag will select state directors to—it's a political appointment so you're doing the work but it's also, you know, you have to play the political game as well.

Sherrod's speech at the NAACP event and its aftermath

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SHIRLEY SHERROD:

I was asked to come and speak. It was March 27th; I will never forget that because it was the anniversary date of my father's funeral. So when they called and asked me to come and speak, initially I was saying no but then it's like, ok, I realize I'm the first person of color in this position and so there were lots of weekends when I just needed to show up for people because they—they had never had access to that office in this way. And then I decided

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to use my life's work to say to people, you know, if you can—like my father was murdered and the man was not punished for it, and some of the things that I've gone through as part of my work with the civil rights movement, if I can now get to a point where I can place that where it should be at this point to try to work with others, then we should all do that.

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That was the whole point of the speech. So I went through telling about this white farmer who came to me for help and how I felt. I thought all white people got everything they were—I mean, there was to get. And it was those of us who were Black who were kept from these things. So the whole point of telling about how I was feeling and what was going on as I—as I worked with this farmer, you know, I'm trying to lead up to, hey I did the right thing. I helped this farmer, I learned from that experience that it's—the whole issue's about being poor. It's not being—just about being white or Black. Here was a white farmer being treated like Black farmers were being treated, so I learned so much from that situation, and I did the right thing in helping him to save the farm.

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Had no idea someone would try to take that speech and cut it and splice it to make it appear that it had just happened. I was telling a story from 24 years earlier, you know. It was just a total shock to me that someone would do what this guy did to me. When this—when all of this stuff started unfolding, you know, about the video and—and—and I'm you know, refusing to help a

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white farmer in my position as—as a federally appointed person, then they said Breitbart, I’m like, who is that? You know, and I kept asking who is it, why would he target me? I had never heard of him before and couldn’t understand why he would take a speech that I made and change it to make it appear that I refused to help a white farmer. It was just mind boggling to me, but then as things unfolded, I realized, you know, I was just a target that he was using to get at the president. He didn’t care about me and he said that to some reporters, he didn’t care about me, you know, and would never apologize to me. I think one reporter told me he told them that—told him that a couple of weeks before he actually died.

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SHIRLEY SHERROD:

The first thing that happened, I was in a meeting with state directors from five other southern states. They—we were in a meeting in Atlanta, checked my email and someone sent a message to me saying, “You should be ashamed of yourself, working as a government official and refusing to help a white farmer.” Well, I sat there in the meeting and actually typed a response to that person and said, no, and explained. And the person said—I think they asked me about the tape, I said, “I can probably get you a copy of it.” or something I said. But I was concerned. So after the meeting ended, we were meeting with 1890 Land Grant Institutions. I sent a message to Washington saying that this had happened and I was really concerned because I knew it could be explosive.

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And they told me they would call me at four o'clock that day. Well, the meeting ended, and I was actually driving from Atlanta back to Albany. So I pulled off the road to the—to a service station at four o'clock and sat there and waited for half an hour. The call didn't come. That was on a Thursday. Didn't hear from them on Friday. And on Monday morning, I got up and went to West Point Georgia where the Kia plant is located because I was meeting part of the staff there for a meeting with officials in that area, and it was while I was in that meeting that all hell broke loose. The secretary called about the hate calls that were coming into the office and then I called to Washington to say, "I need to talk with someone, I need help." They told me that they would call. We were supposed to tour the Kia plant, so I told the staff to go on while I waited for this call.

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Well, they toured the plant and came back, and I had not received the call, so I started telling them—I explained to them what was happening and it was while I was talking to them that the call came through. So I stepped out of the room and I was told that I was being placed on administrative leave. Again, I'm trying to explain that that tape that's out there is not the speech that I made and that I helped that farmer. No one wanted to listen to me so I said, "Ok, what do I do?" Said, "Well, you're on administrative leave." I said, "What does that mean?" "Well, just go home and have a good rest." Is what I was told. So I went back into the meeting and told the staff that I had been placed

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on administrative leave. They were concerned, they wanted—‘cause I was like three and a half hours from—by you know, driving, from the office.

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And I was in a government car. Something I had not been doing but was trying a new car that they had gotten. So they said—they offered to have one of them drive me and I said, “No, I can—I can drive.” So they said, “Can we pray?” I said, “Sure.” So we got in a circle and—and prayed and then I started that three and a half hour ride back to Athens. I had been on the road about maybe an hour when I got the first call from Sheryl Cook, that’s her name. And she wanted to know where I was and I told her this was a long drive, it’s gonna take me at least three and a half hours. And then I started again trying to explain, you know. And she—no one was listening. So somehow, we hung up and the next call I received I was driving through Atlanta.

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And it’s like five o’clock, heavy traffic. And that was when I was told the White House wanted me to resign. Again, I’m trying to explain, you know, that I helped that farmer that, you know, no one—again, they were not listening to anything I said. But each time I talked to them; I was still trying to explain. And so the last call, I had just passed the sign, I think it says 30 miles from Athens. And that’s when I was asked to pull to the side of the road to use my blackberry to submit my letter of resignation, because they wanted Hannity or whoever it is from Fox News to know that—they wanted all of them to know that I had resigned. Now, you know, I’m a fighter, but I’m

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thinking about the effect this is having on President Obama and regretting that I'm even in the middle of this.

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I mean, this is the real fight. But I'm thinking about him and should have been thinking about myself some. But I sat there on the side of the road. I told that person-- the last thing I said to that person is, "You haven't heard the last from me." But I sat there on the side of the road and wrote a letter of resignation and I drove on to Athens. I didn't attempt to go in the office. It never occurred to me they probably would have been blocking me from that. But my car was out in the fenced in area and I drove in and got my car and left that car. And then I went by the apartment, I had to get a few things and I went by my secretary's house to give her my keys, my ID, and everything I thought the government would want from me, and then I was on a four-hour drive from Athens to—to home.

The role Black farmers played in the 1960's

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SHIRLEY SHERROD:

Black farmers played a major role that we don't recognize them for, because they were the ones who had the assets that could bond people out of jail. You know, one of the—the ways—that's why in the earlier years, SNCC came up with that jail, no bail thing because that was crippling the movement to think

that you had to come up with the money to get people out of jail all the time. Well then in these rural areas, it was those landowners, those farmers who actually had the assets that could get people out of jail when they were jailed.

Writing her resignation letter

01:28:34:01

SHIRLEY SHERROD:

Yes, you know, even then I'm challenged with these little keys, but I'm sitting there with one finger typing. I can't remember everything I said in that letter of resignation. You know, it's been a few—a little time has passed but—but—but I was even in whatever I said that night—that day, I'm thinking about the effect this is having, I really didn't want to be the cause of any problem for President Obama.

Response from the media

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SHIRLEY SHERROD:

They were—they didn't know exactly where I was so the media couldn't put their hands on me. I would have been in the state office. They were calling into the state office. A lot of hate calls were coming in there. But like I said, I was in a meeting with the senior staff over in West Point, Georgia. So they didn't know exactly where I was. The first call—well, as I was driving home

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from Athens, I'm on the phone with friends, and my husband, and former co-workers at the Federation of Southern Cooperatives. They were all trying to get me to just not drive all the way home. Just go to a hotel and stay there. But I needed to get home. I needed to get to that place where I knew I could just try to deal with some of the craziness that was going on.

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So I arrived home after midnight and got a call from someone, "Oh, ya lost your job, didn't ya." And just saying ugly things. And then the next morning, oh my goodness. I had a call, I guess—I'm not sure who interviewed me. It must've been the Morning Joe show but I—again, I'm trying to ex—no, but there was another call before then. I missed the one—so after I got that—that call from the person, you know, "You lost your job." and all of this. So my husband had told me that I had a call from someone from CNN while I was driving home, and I tried to return that, so I left a message to leave for that person, saying, "If you want the truth, I'm willing to talk to ya."

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And then once I got home, he—the one from the Atlanta Journal Constitution, I called that number and the young man answered. It's like 12:30 at night but he answered. He said he was about to walk out of his office so I told him, I said, "If you want the truth, then I'm willing to talk to you." He said, "I want the truth." So I sat there and I told him all of this stuff. And he said, "I knew there was more to this story." So, he actually put something on the wire that night that was the beginning of the turnaround.

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I mean, he cut and spliced to make it appear that as a government official, I refused to help a white farmer. I mean, this is explosive for the Obama administration. So that spin was out there, and I knew that it wasn't true. The people at the Department of Ag should've known it wasn't true because in my position at rural development, I would not have been trying to help a farmer save a farm. That's the work of Farmers Home Administration. But everyone was running scared so much with this—this story out there that—and then you hear in my words but you don't realize he's cut and spliced to make it appear that way, so they—everyone's thinking I'm this terrible, terrible person. I've spent my whole life trying to help people.

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And then this stuff that he's put out there makes it appear that I'm this terrible person who would not try to help someone. That's all I've done. That's what my life has been about, helping others. So this is out there. I don't know how I'm gonna deal with it. I just know I 'm gonna deal with it. On that four-hour drive from Athens, my friends are calling me on the phone. They know me. And then you know, I had been a Kellogg fellow and they all knew me, 'cause they started—so what—what started happening, people who knew me knew this wasn't true. So they had started calling into the White House and the Department of Ag. You had Native Americans, you had Asian Americans, you had white, you had Black, they were flooding the Department of Ag and the White House.

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I know they had to wonder, who is this woman? But it's part of the work I had done through the years networking with other groups and other people to advance the work of—you know that we were doing with Black farmers. You know, I've been part of Farm Aid all of those years and that's how we could get the story of what was happening to Black farmers out during Farm Aid. So you made all of these friends and people who knew me knew that that was not true. But then there were all of these other people in the country who didn't know me who thought that she's this terrible person. So that's why I told the last person I talked to is, "You haven't heard the last from me." I had decided that if I had to tell one person a day for the rest of my life, I would do that to try to get the truth out.

Setting the record straight

01:34:23:03

SHIRLEY SHERROD:

Yeah. So—so the next morning I get this—I did a radio—I mean a did a call by phone and I—my husband watched all of these news shows all the time and I didn't so I didn't know these people but if this is a way I can try and get the truth out, I'm gonna be interviewed by everybody but Fox. I refused to be interviewed by Fox, period. So I was doing—I did that interview and then the yard was full of news people. That big satellite truck was already there from

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CNN, and so I agreed to do an eleven o'clock show and I think his name was Tom—Tony Harris. So we set up for that. It was while I was on the air, trying to explain my side of things that you know, he stopped me 'cause—so I--you know, I stopped talking.

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He's like, "We have someone here." And so the next voice I heard was the voice of the white farmer's wife. They realized what was happening to me and they started calling in to CNN to tell them what I did to help them and to get them to understand that they have that farm today because of the work that I did. So, it was one thing for me to try to tell the truth, but when one farm—one farm family called in and stood—they tried in every way they could to trip them up, to see if they would say something different. To this day they won't, because we—as I tried to tell the people at the Department of Ag, we became good friends.

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I mean, I often tell the story. I say, "I realized we had really moved into friendship one day when we—when we went to see the lawyer and we stopped at a place up in Americus, Georgia to eat lunch. And when we came back out, Roger took a chew of his tobacco and then offered some to me." It was like, wow.

Her appearance on *The View* and a phone call from Obama

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01:36:43:10

SHIRLEY SHERROD:

So when I arrived into—see, I was with CNN. I actually left. That Tuesday, CNN asked, “Would you mind going to their headquarters in Atlanta?” Well, who wouldn’t want to get away from all that that’s out in my yard? So I said, “Yes.” And they kept saying there’s a car coming and then finally a girl said, “Would you mind riding in my car?” I said, “No.” I just wanted to get away from that. So we went into Atlanta and did a couple of shows that night and then the next morning I’m there all day long, doing one interview and another, so the young lady from CNN came to me at one point and said, “Matt Lauer wants you to come to New York.” But I told them, “You don’t need to do that.”

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And she walked away, and I called her back and said, “No, I want to go to New York.” So CNN was smart. They didn’t just send me off to—they were in control of the schedule. So they put my husband and I on a flight to New York and we got in that evening and did some shows and then the next morning, they had a full schedule. And one of them was the View. My husband’s family was having their family reunion, so he wanted me to come back. I’m like, “No,” put him on a flight back to Albany and, “I’m gonna do the—I’m gonna do *The View*.” So you know, I remember being there and Whoopi Goldberg asked me during the show if the president had called. And I said no, and she said a few things about it. So when—when we left, that’s what I saw, what the

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pap—paparazzi was all about. My goodness. When they opened that gate for us to drive out, they're trying to pull the doors open on the car, it was really scary, my first experience with all of this.

01:38:45:00

But um, my phone rang, and it was John Lewis, Congressman Lewis, and he was calling to talk to me about what happened and said that they had met with the Secretary of Ag the day before and all. So when I hung up with him, I noticed I had a text message from the White House and I was—the message was asking me to call them. They wanted to arrange a call with the president, so I talked to this young man and he told me they wanted to set the call up. I had to make a decision. Do I—will I talk with this- with the president in this car 'cause I was on my way to the airport and a person from CNN was with me or do I wait till I get to the airport. Now you have to know that since Tuesday Morning, I had only been with news people.

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I had no idea what was happening out there with the general public. I didn't know how people were receiving the story and the truth, so I had no idea what was going on, but I finally decided I didn't know where I would go in the airport to take the call, so I decided to do it in the car and a young lady from CNN just told the driver, if we got to the airport before I finished, just keep driving around. Then she started pulling a camcorder out and I'm like, "No," I said, "you will not tape me while I'm talking to the president." I said, "Now after we finish, if you want an interview on that, I'm willing to talk to you

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about it but you can't tape me." So then the call was set up and—and we talked. First thing he said was, "You're a hard person to find."

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I wanted to say, everybody in this country knew I've been with CNN all week but I wouldn't do it. I wouldn't call him out like that. But we talked. He was trying to say to me—he started out by saying the issues I had been bringing out during the week he was well aware of them and my response was, "But you don't understand those issues the way I do." And he said, "Oh, yes I do. If you read my book, you'll see." And I'm—so you know, I just wouldn't give on that. He's trying to convince me that he understands those issues the way I do and I know unless you lived down here and dealt with this racism the way we've had to deal with it, you don't have a true understanding. I'm not saying he can't understand, but I didn't feel at that time that he did, and so we went back and forth with that.

01:41:38:08

And finally, I just stopped it by saying, "You know what, you ought to come for a visit." And he told me Sanford, Congressman Bishop, had been trying to get him to come. And he kind of led me to believe he would do it. But he didn't do it and he owes me a visit, even now. Now, when the press asked me later did he apologize, I--my response was, he's the president of the United States, and by the mere fact that he called me, I took it as an apology. But he didn't say, "I'm sorry."

01:42:18:03

I took it more as he felt he needed to call me because I think he probably—or someone saw and heard Whoopi Goldberg’s comments on The View. I mean, they just looked upon me as being a nothing and he probably had that view as well and so it was a call he had to make and—and— ‘cause that—you know, there were lots of others who always asked, “Did he apologize?” You know, “Shame on him.” But no he didn’t. I’m—I’m just thinking, he had never heard of the Sherrods, certainly not Shirley Sherrod and you know, I wasn’t a Coretta King or some of the others who were more well known. It didn’t mean that my work wasn’t just as important.

Being Black and a woman

01:43:21:06

SHIRLEY SHERROD:

They threw me under the bus. And when I saw email messages that a reporter had gotten later, they were really proud of themselves. Really patting themselves on the back the next morning for taking care of the Shirley Sherrod problem so quickly. They didn’t know it had already started turning around because it was based on a lie, and they didn’t try to dig deep enough to try to see that it was a lie. They were just interested in—and they did more harm by doing that because as the truth came out, it showed that I had absolutely no support from the administration.

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I was totally on my own. I think because I was a Black woman and—and not someone who was known—I didn't have—even though I had worked and there were lots of people who knew me and knew my work, they didn't. So it was easy to think that I'm a nobody that you can just throw under the bus and keep moving.

Sherrod's situation in contrast with Skip Gates and the Beer Summit

01:44:33:22

SHIRLEY SHERROD:

Yes. I looked at the fact that he was just simply trying to get in his house and—and here I was dealing with some major stuff and a woman. Now I don't drink beer so to—to invite me there to drink beer would have been the wrong thing, but to reach out to me I felt would have been the right thing. Even if you didn't invite me to the White House. Even if you didn't want to meet me. It's just when you—when you look at my life's work and even when you look at the work that I did for those eleven months I was at Georgia—at the Georgia state office of rural development, you just—someone should have tried to reach out to me to say thank you for even that.

01:45:26:11

Because you know, I got a note later on saying, "Oh gosh," you know, "we pulled the record for Georgia, and you were able to get three times more money in two persistently poor counties in Georgia in the eleven months you

were there than they did the previous eight years. You know, I'm—I've worked in—I grew up in the rural area and I've worked in the rural area all of my life. If there's anything I know, it's rural.

Feelings towards Obama

01:45:58:04

SHIRLEY SHERROD:

He's still my president. That's why, you know, I've had interviews where—and I won't call names but the person interviewing would get really upset with me because I wouldn't say anything negative about him. He—you know, he still—he—you know, I have the greatest amount of respect for him. There were some things where I thought he could have gone more deeply into— to what should have been done but—but I realize also he's trying—he was trying to be the president of everyone in the United States. I know how it is when you have to walk a tight line. That's just the way it is in this country.

Obama's re-election

01:46:53:23

SHIRLEY SHERROD:

I didn't think it would happen again, so for him to get re-elected, it's like wow, really? Even though a lot of stuff had happened, you really thought maybe things had really changed. But I look at the fact that in my home

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county of Baker County, where I struggled so hard to try to register to vote, and then the Supreme Court—well before the Supreme Court made the changes in- in 2013, the board of—the registrar in the county had come to one of our county meetings to say, you know, “We want to close four of the five voting precincts in this—in this county because we can save 8,000 dollars.”

01:47:43:10

And so we—here we were fighting that. Now we’ve been successful at keeping them from doing it, but all of this effort to keep us from being able to vote as a backlash to people really getting some courage and feeling that things have changed in this country so that we can just be citizens like everyone else, it’s—it’s discouraging to see what’s happening now. I voted for him in the first election and I voted for him in the second and if he could have run a third, I would have voted for him a third time.

How Obama dealt with racism

01:48:24:03

SHIRLEY SHERROD:

Oh gosh. The far right really—I mean the whole tea party thing surfaced and—and every effort was made to keep him from being able to accomplish the things he could have accomplished for us—for not just Black people but for us as citizens of this United States of America. It just seems that if it was something that came from his administration, there were all these people

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who thought it was a bad thing when in--in reality it was a good thing for them. They fought what they called Obamacare and when people realized those who have it now, that it was the Affordable Care Act, you know, they fought it because it had his name attached to it. And here was something that was really helping them. But because he's a Black person and he's the president, this whole effort to undermine, it's the same thing that's happening now. Everything he tried to put in place, the current president is trying to tear it apart.

01:49:31:23

You know, it would have been great if as president he could have been more comfortable dealing with it. What better way, you know, to have a person who's half white, half Black, but because he has Black in him, he's Black. But to sort of try to help us bridge that gap between the way things were when we were slaves and through the Jim Crow era into now where we should be able to just all get along and work together to help everyone be what they can be. But when you're a Black person, you've just always got to be careful to watch what you say, watch what you do. You've always—you're always having to set that example that others don't have to worry about.

01:50:30:23

You know, as- as Black people, we know we have to do what we have to do to try to get along and to survive in this country. It just would be so good if we all could be free to live, to love, to—to grow, to be.

Racism in America

01:50:56:19

SHIRLEY SHERROD:

It was always there, you know? There were those times when they spit at John Lewis and some others and things just started getting ugly then. Looked like it was—it was ok for—for anything to go, to be ok. It was ok to do the things they had been thinking. You know, ok for some of those things that probably hadn't been brought to the surface since the days of the Klan and some of those groups that would ride at night to scare people. It was ok to try to—see, the whole thing, I think is to try to—you can't put us back in the box. That ain't gonna happen. You can't even get us back to the point where we were when we were really afraid and had to band together. That's been tried. Trying to keep him back so that he wouldn't—wouldn't accomplish anything during his administration and they did a lot.

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But then for someone to come along after him to—to make it a point to try to tear down everything he tried to build up and therefore these relationships, you know, to make it ok to use nigger again, to make it ok to do some of the things that have been done to Black people and other groups now, it's just awful that we would go back to that. We've been there. We've been there as Black people. But to go back to that, oh my goodness.

Obama's legacy

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01:52:40:05

SHIRLEY SHERROD:

I think because he became president, it helped young Black people see that so many things are possible. Where we thought there were always doors or barriers to—to being able to be some of the things we wanted to be in life. I think it opened those doors and barriers for young people.

END TC: 01:53:09:16