



Acres of Ancestry Initiative by Kelley Wills/Brain Flower Designs

RIGHTING WRONGS

Alumna Tracy Lloyd McCurty seeks justice for Black farmers.

By Jackie Torok

T Tracy Lloyd McCurdy, J.D. '99 has parlayed the B.S. in marketing she earned from North Carolina A&T into a passion for securing justice for Black farmers and preserving their proud heritage and farmlands.

McCurdy's advocacy resulted in the successful passage of the Emergency Relief for Farmers of Color Act, part of the \$1.9 trillion federal COVID-19 relief spending package President Joe Biden approved March 11—just two days after N.C. A&T celebrated its 130th anniversary as a public historically Black land-grant university.

The act, which was introduced by the Rev. Raphael Warnock, a freshman Democratic senator from Georgia, provided \$4 billion for the U.S. Department of Agriculture to forgive direct or guaranteed loans to farmers of color and \$1 billion in aid to farmers of color including technical assistance, legal support, direct payments to farmers for past discrimination, land access and other enterprises for farmers of color. Over the summer, the implementation of the debt cancellation program was halted due to various lawsuits from white farmers alleging reverse discrimination.

McCurdy is working on revisions to the debt cancellation program in the Build Back Better Act moving through Congress. Under the Act, debt cancellation will be provided to “economically distressed” farmers according to specific race neutral criteria. According to the criteria, debt cancellation will be provided to 91% of the 3,100 Black farmers who have existing debt with USDA—less than 8% of all Black farmers will receive debt cancellation.

To address the urgent needs of the remaining 92% of Black farmers, McCurdy fought for the allocation of at least \$750 million in direct payments to farmers who suffered from past and ongoing USDA discrimination. Both debt cancellation and direct payments will be treated as non-taxable income.

The effort to right the wrongs of the past and correct egregious U.S. District Court outcomes from outcomes known as Pigford I and II, which have caused Black farmers to lose about 90% of their land between 1910 and now, has been decades in the making, McCurdy said.

The Pigford settlements arose from a 1997 class action lawsuit that accused the USDA of discriminating against Black farmers through loans and other policies, as well as failing to investigate or respond to discrimination claims. The USDA agreed to compensate them with cash and debt relief cancellation in what became known as Pigford I.

Pigford I was a \$1 billion settlement, but only 4.8% of the debt settlement went to debt cancellation. Attorney malpractice, incompetence and the aggressive posture of the U.S. Department of Justice also contributed to the failures of the lawsuit in providing restorative land justice to Black farmers.

This led to Pigford II, a 2010 settlement in which the federal government agreed to pay \$1.25 billion to claimants left out of Pigford I; however, none of these funds were used to rectify the injustices of the Pigford I settlement. For example, in the Pigford I settlement, Black farmers had to identify a similarly situated white farmer who the USDA had not discriminated against to succeed on their discrimination claims—and without discovery. Consequently, 6,906 farmers—actual farmers with verifiable farm ID numbers—were denied recovery outright.

As the co-founder and executive director of the Black Belt Justice Center based in Washington, D.C., McCurdy took on the farmers' cause and went all in on the effort to seek a more inclusive bill because of the federal government's history of discrimination against all farmers of color.

“This is definitely a full-circle moment,” McCurdy said of the act's passage, as well as documentation of the work that led to it becoming part of the Congressional Record. “One of the farmers said to me, ‘We were in a sinking ship, and no one would help us. And you didn't just throw us a rope; you got in the sinking ship with us.’”

But McCurdy said she is by no means the hero of the saga.

“The story that hasn't been lifted up in the media, for me, is the tenacity and the resilience of our elder Black farmers who have been fighting for debt cancellation and to dismantle institutional discrimination within USDA for the last 30 years,” she said, noting that several had represented themselves in federal court. “I want to be clear: the \$5 billion debt cancellation is not reparations. Not at all. This is a step toward restorative land justice for Black farmers.”



McCURTY

Now is the time to seize the momentum generated by the Emergency Relief for Farmers of Color Act by reestablishing the African American agricultural land base – which was first created entirely through the self-sufficiency of Black farmers – and continuing its legacy, McCurdy said.

This is the heart of Black Belt Justice Center's mission, which facilitates the Acres of Ancestry Initiative/Black Agrarian Fund. Founded by McCurdy in 2012, the center is a legal and advocacy nonprofit dedicated to the preservation and regeneration

of African American farmlands and land-based livelihoods through effective legal representation, advocacy, and community education. The Acres of Ancestry/Black Agrarian Fund works cooperatively with fiber artists, heritage quilters and cultural knowledge keepers to further support food and fiber economies in the rural South.

As part of outreach and education efforts, a new exhibit will open (2022) in Charleston, South Carolina. "Griots of Cotton, Indigo, & Clay" is a fiber arts and earth-based crafts exhibition that pays homage to Black farmers and artists who preserve the wisdom of the earth through lineage, land memory and material culture.

"Griots of Cotton, Indigo, & Clay" features the debut of the Permanent Collection of the Acres of Ancestry Initiative and artworks from the Return of the Bees Quilt Collective. It is curated by Torreeah "Cookie" Washington, a fourth-generation needle worker, fiber artist and independent curator from Goose Creek, South Carolina.

The exhibit will run from Jan. 17 through Feb. 28 at City Gallery at Waterfront Park, with an opening reception scheduled for Jan. 22. For details, and to learn more about the restorative works of the Black Belt Justice and Acres of Ancestry Initiative/Black Agrarian Fund, visit www.acresofancestry.org.

As both the maternal great-great-granddaughter of Lizzie and Gordon Webb, who toiled as sharecroppers and independent farmers in Scotland Neck, North Carolina, and the daughter of childhood friends who grew up in Tarboro, North Carolina, McCurdy was born to champion social justice for African American rural communities.

Her father, Bryant Eugene Lloyd, graduated from A&T in 1969 with a business degree while her mother, Faye Lewis Lloyd, graduated from North Carolina Central University in 1970.

"My parents instilled in me a deep sense of pride in our HBCUs," McCurdy said.

Faye Lloyd was a high school teacher for more than 30 years in Durham, North Carolina, where she taught English, American Literature and Black Humanities. Throughout McCurdy's childhood, her mother took her to various theatre productions at N.C. Central, where she also attended summer enrichment programs.

As a teenager, McCurdy looked forward to tagging along with her best friend and her best friend's sister to Aggie Fest and the Greatest Homecoming on Earth.

"Growing up, my father shared with me stories about his college days at N.C. A&T," McCurdy said. "Dad spoke reverently of the thriving Black-owned businesses in Greensboro. He loved talking about the legendary Boss Webster's and his famous fried bologna sandwiches.

"Dad also talked about the Greensboro Uprising in '69 and how the National Guard occupied campus. Learning about the Greensboro Four solidified my resolve to attend N.C. A&T," she said.

After receiving her undergraduate degree from A&T, McCurdy went on to earn her juris doctor in 2003 from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she worked on the Pigford I settlement as a law student in 2001 with the North Carolina Association of Black Lawyers' Land Loss Prevention Project.

An Aggie connection with efforts to bring justice to Black farmers had already been created in 1999 during a fairness hearing for Pigford I. That's when Stephon J. Bowens, executive director of the Land Loss Prevention Project, cited the work of Donald McDowell, Ph.D., an A&T economics professor whose research showed that legacy farmers who had been starved off their land because of discrimination would need at least \$250,000 to reenter the agriculture industry.

"I wanted to live a meaningful life in service of Black folk and was determined to find my purpose at N.C. A&T. If David Richmond, Franklin McCain, Ezell Blair Jr. (Jibreel Khazan), and Joe McNeil found theirs, I would, too."