

**CULTIVATING GOLD: ADVANCING COLLABORATION
AND YOUTH EMPOWERMENT IN FOOD, AGRICULTURE AND NUTRITION**
Wednesday, October 30, 2024 – 2:30–2:40 PM

Facilitator:

Jim Snee – Board Chairman, President and CEO – Hormel Foods

Robert J. Jones – Member, World Food Prize Foundation Council of Advisors and
Chancellor, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Jackie Joyner-Kersey – Olympic Legend and Philanthropist, Founder and CEO, Jackie Joyner-Kersey Foundation

Introduction

Jim Snee

Jackie Joyner-Kersey really needs no introduction, but I'm going to give her one anyway, because she is an Olympic legend, a philanthropist. She's the founder of the Jackie Joyner-Kersey Foundation and I had the pleasure this morning to hear her address, the Global Youth Institute. What an inspiring leader that's making a change in her hometown of East St. Louis.

And then Dr. Robert Jones who's the Chancellor of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign – and when you have a chance to really hear about his deep agricultural roots, his passion for education and his passion for change, it's clear that we will achieve the results that we want to achieve. It's going to take some time, it's going to take some resources, and it's going to take some really strong partners.

So please join me in welcoming Jackie and Dr. Jones to the stage.

Jim I made Jackie leave her six Olympic medals backstage. She wanted to carry them out here. But it's such an honor to be here with the two of you today and just knowing both of you and your commitment to hunger, to agriculture, to making a difference. I think it's important for everybody to hear, you know, kind of your story. So, you know, Jackie grew up in East St. Louis, and I want to hear about what that was like. But then also your desire to go back to East St. Louis. You could have gone anywhere, right? You could have gone back to UCLA in Southern California, but you didn't. You went back to East St. Louis, so tell us a bit about that journey.

Jackie So growing up in East St. Louis and having people pour into me and saw the potential that I did not know that I had, being able to athletics as a gift but then to further my education to really start looking at other things that I wanted to do – because all I heard was, nothing good comes from our community. And I know there are great people there that are trying to do great things. And so my parents were young, but they instilled in me a commitment to hard work. My mother wanted me to get a job and an education and pay her 10% of the money that I earned and, you know, didn't care about me running, jumping and throwing.

But I think for me it's very important to recognize and be proud of where you're from, regardless of the circumstances and regardless of what people may think of your community. And someone has to stand up in order to be a role model for a generation

of today and the generation before; because, if you can't claim that you are from somewhere, then how can you go anywhere? And so for me it was always about trying to get people to have an appreciation for the people that are there but then also today to come into the community and see how the community would embrace anyone from all walks of life with honor and respect.

Jim That's amazing. Dr. Jones, son of a sharecropper, I have to imagine in a similar but different way your story has some similarities.

Dr. Jones Well, I think there are quite a few similarities, and the first one to start with is—neither Jackie nor I came from a middle class or wealthy families, but yet notwithstanding that, there was something internal to us that gave us that extra drive and determination. And for me, you know, my parents were sharecroppers. I knew that that was not the road that I decided to pursue. I knew I wanted to be a scientist ever since I was about nine years old.

And one of the best gifts that I think my parents gave to me was the courage to tell the landowners that their kids would not spend a day picking cotton, shaking peanuts the way most of the sharecroppers' families. It was very much of tradition that the black kids would miss weeks out of school to harvest crops. That's the best gift my parents gave my brother and my sister and myself was to make sure we got a good education.

That didn't mean, however... My dad was a practical man. When that school bus drove through that plantation at about 3 o'clock, we got on that school bus and picked cotton and shook peanuts until the sun went down. So he had his principles, but he also was very practical. And I was very fortunate enough to have a high school vacation where... call me professor in ninth grade, so I guess it stuck somewhere along the way. I ended up going to Fort Valley State, a predominantly black college land grant university in Peach County, Georgia. Did well enough there to go to the University of Georgia where I did a master's degree, did research on peanuts. Left there, went to the University of Missouri, studied tall fescue, and if you don't know what tall fescue is, ask anyone that grows cattle in the state of Missouri; they'll tell you exactly what it is.

And went to Minnesota when I was 26 years old. I had the great honor of running a very large research lab in plant physiology and molecular biology. And ironically my focus became—How do we make sure our grain crops are tolerant to heat and drought, and did all the physiological, molecular biology work that has now led to some of the basic work that has helped us provide heat-tolerant and drought-tolerant crops.

But I guess the connection back to what we are talking about today is that I got pulled into an administrative position where I was asked to establish the kind of program that Hormel is doing with the community in Austin. I did it at the University of Minnesota and a very economically depressed area called North Minneapolis. Created the UROEC, the Urban Research Outreach and Engagement Center.

And so that's been my path to this work as a scientist, as a scholar, but also as an administrator who sees how critically important... You have talked about it for a company. Universities, particularly land grant universities have an obligation to do this kind of work both locally, domestically and globally.

Jim Yeah, interesting. Well, you don't sound very passionate about it. I wish you would be.

Dr. Jones I'm sorry. I'll try to tone it down.

Jim Amazing, amazing journey. And I want to now talk about kind of where you are today, right? And so, Jackie, I think about you having gone to the University of California...

Jackie UCLA.

Jim Los Angeles, UCLA. Thank you. I don't want to make that mistake. You know, a great athlete, Olympic champion. And by the way, Jackie still holds the world record in the heptathlon, so look it up, 1988. But, you know, like I said earlier, I mean you could have gone anywhere. You could have done anything else. But you went back to East St. Louis, and you started the Jackie Joyner-Kersey Foundation. So why and how?

Jackie You know, the why's, they're really important. And one of our philosophies has always been — *Those who know why will always be those who know how*. And as I was a student, I knew how, but I didn't know the why. And deep down on the inside, I knew I wanted to be back in the community of East St. Louis. And I go off to college and I'm diagnosed as an asthmatic. I lose my mother unexpectedly and travel back home. And I got to a center where I found so much love and joy and people poured into me — a librarian at that time. I learned how to check out books and book reports. Katherine Dunham, who is from our community, did African dance, did the Meals on Wheels program, did the arts and also did the sports.

But I go to the doors and there's padlocks on there, so I just started thinking — OK, where did the young people go? And at that time I'm 18 years of age, and I have this audacious idea — oh, I can open this center — but I didn't know you need money to do all that.

Jim Resources, yeah.

Jackie But I realized that I had the ability maybe to make an Olympic team, and how could I use my Olympic experience in being able to bring a spotlight but then also being able to go back home and... You know, you talk about planting seeds and planting a seed, being able to work with people who believe in me, opening the JJK Center in 2000. You fast forward at that time, prior to 2000 and where we are today. We were only doing like after-school programming. We realized when our students were coming in, they were really noisy. We weren't feeding them at the time; another barrier was that they couldn't get there because of transportation. So we really bridged the gap in being a part of the food program, then also being able to provide transportation, being able to pour into the students.

And for me it's best that they see me, not just read about me or see me on television — I might not walk in their shoes, but I have walked the same pavement — and try to inspire them to be the best that they could be. And fast forward where we are today with the Jackie Joyner-Kersey Food, Agriculture and Nutrition. We called it JJK FAN, the collaborative. And as I evolve and try to become the best, it's because people believe in me.

And when you have the head of the University, Chancellor Jones, lending his people to support what we're trying to do, the head of Lansdowne Up another partner, Mestemacher. Mr. Mestemacher, and Carol Mestemacher, believing in what we're trying to do in the community of East St. Louis. You had the head of Donald Danforth Plant Science Center, you know, and all of these pieces come together. But before those pieces came together, it was the foresight of a dear friend of mine, Marshal, who

we were trying to do some in North St. Louis and not having the resources, being able to call on people from the Family Forum Foundation to believe in us, but not having money to do the tractor or keeping up the grounds and trying to do these things.

And the collaborative of all of us coming together is bringing something that you talk about transforming of community, the blight of what people say about East St. Louis, getting people to come and see. So Pastor sold a greenhouse, a student being able to do collard greens to see what could grow. It's just amazing and inspiring.

Well, that's enough for me.

Jim It is, it is absolutely amazing, and I hope that all of you, if you haven't already, have Googled or looked up the JJK Foundation, the collaborative FAN. We had a chance to visit it, gosh, probably now a year and a half ago. And until you get there and you see it and you really experience it, as great a job as Jackie did describing it, words still don't do it justice. What the facility is, the resources, and the impact that it's having is amazing.

Now in your comments you talked about amazing people, amazing partnership. And we've had a chance to meet a lot of those partners. And you talk about planting seeds. Well, obviously you've planted a seed with Chancellor Jones here, because they have gotten engaged.

And so, Chancellor Jones, just curious, from your perspective, what was it that you saw that was such an opportunity to become a big partner?

Dr. Jones Well, let me put it this way. From where I sat as the Chancellor to the University of Illinois—a long background in ag, ag research, plant science research, fundamentally understand the importance of food and food insecurity issues—to me it was a no-brainer in many ways. The University had a presence in East St. Louis 25 years ago, but for some reason it backed away from that. And I've been asking questions—why did we back away?

Then all of a sudden I start to hear about this young lady, and it came about two ways, through, I call them Mark 2 of the two marks. And Jackie has just mentioned them, who are alums of my great university. So that was an important connection. And then Dr. Kimberly Kidwell, who was the dean of the College of Agriculture, Food and Environmental Sciences, developed a very strong relationship with Jackie—brought Jackie to campus, and I had a chance to meet with her and understand what this partnership was all about.

And so for me it is what I call a good example of what I call radical, not just bold, but radical collaborations where you have these unusual partners that come together with a common sense of purpose, and Jackie... The requirements for that is you have to have trust, and there has to be mutuality. So that's the framework to which I look at partnership. The fact that the University of Illinois is a land grant university, we have an obligation to work in communities.

And it became easier to partner with someone like Jackie who already is anchored in the community, around educating pre-K education that plants the seed for the next generation of students that I need to attend the University of Illinois or any other higher education institution. And then combine that with our longstanding land grant mission to leverage not only our College of Agriculture but our Extension Service that is world class and 4H to assist Jackie in carrying out her mission. And I

just love the framework, that the educational framework to get these people interested in getting an education is through food, nutrition.

So it's a perfect ecosystem for a university like mine to take a deep sense of responsibility. We moved our extension operation on this campus that Jackie's school is a part of, to be part of this ecosystem to do some transformative things that we think, just like your Hormel strategy, should become a model for other places to emulate.

Jim That's a little better passion.

Dr. Jones OK, I'll tone it down here.

Jim Absolutely amazing. So before we get to the future, I do want to take a minute and reflect on it. As you think about the great work that's happened in East St. Louis, what are you most proud of? As you sit here today thinking about when the padlocks are on the door to when you go back to St. Louis this afternoon and you walk into the facility, what are you most proud of?

Jackie What I'm most proud of is that, one, we're doing it; and, two, that we're able to expose our students to things that they didn't know they needed to be exposed to; and to see our young people learning where food comes from, not just from a can or a box, and to see their excitement, introducing them to careers that they didn't even know existed.

And here we're talking about food, but they want to be entrepreneurs, you know, want to get into cosmetics, and how agriculture connects them to that, being able to have them to buy in and be open to learning and to see the success of not letting the Mississippi River divide us. To have a Donald Danforth Plant Science Center send over their researchers and send over their leaders to really work with our students makes a tremendous difference. Instead of our students having to go to them, they found a way to come to us and open a door so our students will look forward to going over and seeing – Wow! This research center, the endless possibilities.

So I was saying, and then just the success of our students and using... You know, we have a curriculum called "Winning in Life," and one of the principles is risk-taking. They might not like zucchini, but on that day it's risk-taking, and these women take a risk and they try some zucchini, and zucchini sticks; they learn something about a vegetable that they had no idea about.

Jim Yeah, it is. And again I mean just words can't describe the facility and the impact. They just can't. so, Chancellor Jones, from your perspective, I mean your engagement with it, what are you most proud of, either personally or on behalf of the University?

Dr. Jones Well, I guess I look at it from multiple perspectives. What I'm most proud of is what Jackie and the entire team has built together. Because this is a new model of what I call a community of public engagement where you go into a community and you try to leverage your assets with the assets that are already in the community. One of the biggest misperception about university engagement is the old model that – We are from the university, we have all the knowledge, and we're here to help. That doesn't work. It hasn't worked in decades.

And so what my approach..., and it's good to see it coming to life with our partnerships with JJK, is that we are leveraging the expertise, her passion for educating young people, using food as a way to get people interested in education. And it does leverage not only my leadership role at the University of Illinois, but it's

also... I must inform you that I'm glad to be on the Council of Advisors for this great organization. I'm also a board member of National 4-H, and there are a few other places. I'm on the Forum Farm Foundation board.

So this is all the stuff that's been the source of my excitement of being a scientist and being a university administrator, all coalescing around this vision of what these organizations... (I'm also on the board of Danforth—I think I didn't mention that; let me be clear.) So this is perfect ecosystem for me, leveraging all these points of contact and my leadership role to work with a partner to do something.

Frankly, Jackie had done amazing work, but I think all of us would agree it takes the seamless partnership to do this kind of work at scale. You showed a slide that showed your partnership. It takes a partnership to make this work. And I'm most proud of the fact that all of these entities that I'm associated with, align with this kind of work, to bring about substantive change.

And there's nothing more fundamental than an education. And it's hard to be educated if you've got food insecurity issues. And so this is one of the things across my 47 years in higher education I'm most proud of, is to play a small part in building on the outstanding platform and dream that Jackie has brought to this vital community. And we are going to be leveraging our 4-H positive youth development strategy in partnership with Jackie as well, to make sure we continue to motivate you.

Jim And I know from a corporate America perspective, being in a number of different industry associations, the topic of food security has never been elevated to the point that it is today. Right? The conversations that are happening across conference rooms and boardrooms, I mean it's unlike anything I've ever seen. And so I think that, when you think about partnerships and where corporations fit into this... I know we've got some great sponsors—we saw their logos on the signs outside—but I really do think there's an opportunity for companies and corporations to step up and get engaged in even a bigger way.

So the future. I know you're not done.

Jackie I can't be.

Jim And just as you think about these amazing partners that you have, that you describe, that are here, you know, what's next? Where do you want to see this thing go?

Jackie Ooh. What's next is that we talk about JJK FAN. We're actually building an innovation center that will open fall of 2025. So that is huge for our community, for our staff, for our students. And when I think of what Lansdowne Up is doing, working from the soft skills, getting ready for the workforce, and then to have Uofl, From Crater to Careers, Donald Danforth Plant Science Center, there are careers there that young people can see and be able to continue to help us grow and have the ag tech people want to be in the community of East St. Louis.

It's so important, and this is local that we're doing. And that if we continue to grow and do the things that I know that's going to outlive me, but that generation, the next generation is going to be... I want to say, I hope, I know it will be in great hands if they continue to be innovators, creators, allow their minds to be expanded. Because when you look at food insecurity, the things that we are faced with, you talk about health disparities, you talk about poverty—all of those things are in East St. Louis. We live in a food desert. And so being able to just be a link and finding others to come along would make a difference.

And you look forward to—how do we look at how AI is going to play a significant role in it. But it's what we're doing in the community of East St. Louis. And those of you that are out there, come and visit us. Come and see what we're doing, and in return we'll come see you and see what you are doing.

Jim Yeah, and so that means you're going to be around for a while, doing this work. You're not going anywhere.

Jackie Oh, no. It's like we reckon to have Teflon in 36 years, you know, in town, so, God willing, you keep me around to keep going. Pour that knowledge into others. But I'll always be a motivator, inspiring people to believe *the impossible is probable*. Because you would have never believed that this was happening, not only what we're talking about with the Innovation Center being built, housing is being built around the area. We have the wrestling wing. We're talking about a whole campus. The State Police, they're going to build their headquarters. So you're seeing movement. Now we just slowly need to get that tax base where people could come in and make a difference, and then industries can come over on the east side. You know, they'd have a place over on the Missouri side too—now I'm not knocking Missouri—but anyway, East St. Louis.

Jim And I love just the forethought, that it's not just—hey, we're going to get food for students. It's, I mean who talks about tax base, right, when we're thinking about this issue, right? I mean, so the comprehensive nature of your approach and the process is absolutely unbelievable. And it's great to hear what the future looks like.

So, Chancellor Jones, as you think about the work that is being done and the obligation that you said land grant universities have—the work that's being done in East St. Louis, the work that's being done in Austin, Minnesota—how replicable do you think those opportunities are in other communities. Not thinking about the Atlanta, Georgias, or the Chicago-Illinois, but thinking about the Algona, Iowa, Willmar, Minnesota?

Dr. Jones Right. Well, I think there are many elements of what we built in partnership with Jackie that can be replicated. But I'll go back and remind you, that each situation is unique, and this is a very, very unique situation. And I think we've tried to take full advantage of it. And Jackie just shared with you how catalytic this has been for other assets to co-locate to be part of this ecosystem.

But I can tell you, based on the work that I did at Minnesota, work that I've done in Albany, New York, where I was president there for four years, and I'm in my ninth year at Urbana-Champaign, and we have leveraged the assets that we have in aces through my Public Engagement Office, that we are a university that's engaged with the public. And we have a success story, each... Working with Carbondale around a food desert and a cooperative foods venue is critically important. So elements of what we are doing in East St. Louis are very much applicable to other communities.

But again I remind you, it starts from a point of respect, having somebody that's anchored in the community that you can partner with. And the university then leverages its resources, but it can't be about the university driving or leading. We are there to assist—and I can tell you, folks, from where I sit, that's the epitome of the land grant university for the 21st century and beyond, is to be in community to assist, not always to lead, and to be respectful of the knowledge, and co-create the knowledge that brings about the systemic, systematic change that we see happening in East St. Louis. We're doing it in different communities in Chicago right now,

through Extension, through the SNAP-Ed program where we are delivering food and vertical farming systems.

But I can tell you the next thing we want to drive in partnership with Jackie is to get more into the health delivery business. It's one thing to educate people and to educate them about food and food issues. It's another then to use a network of 27 Extension offices and to leverage the fact that we have the first engineering-based college of medicine in the world, to use AI and other technologies to deliver health intervention and health services to underserved communities.

So that's what's in it next to us, and to leverage the full weight of national 4-H around this positive youth development strategy. And you can do it in East St. Louis. You can do it elsewhere.

Jim That answer was yes?

Jackie Yes, and I'd just like to add what the Chancellor said – “With respect” – because what we do is that we meet people where they are, and that's a huge difference in meeting people to gain their trust, to gain their respect, to allow expansion to be able to happen.

Jim You're entering into a sacred space, right, when you start dealing with basic needs. So, well, it's hard to believe we've already been up here for 31 minutes, but I think, based on this conversation, these two individuals did not disappoint, right, in terms of their level of engagement, their level of commitment, their passion for solving such a critical issue. So I want to thank you, Jackie, Chancellor Jones, for your time, for the conversation exceeded all expectations, which were already really high. So thank you, and please join me in thanking both of them.

Jackie Thank you.

Dr. Jones Thank you.