

Saville Productions, Arbor Day Foundation, and
Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Project
Present



A film by Jennifer MacArthur

97 minutes

Official Selection:

Full Frame 2024 – World Premiere (NEW DOCS Competition)
Hot Docs Film Festival 2024 – International Premiere (Land|Sky|Sea Competition)

thefilmcollaborative.org/films/familytree

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FAMILY TREE SYNOPSIS

Family Tree explores sustainable forestry in North Carolina through the stories of two Black families working to preserve their land and legacy. Debut Director Jennifer MacArthur's cinéma vérité approach reveals the vast task of maintaining the land while navigating challenging family dynamics, unscrupulous developers, and changing environmental needs. The forest itself and the beauty of its changing seasons become a primary character in this family drama.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

By Jennifer MacArthur

When I was 15, my family moved from Connecticut to Alaska, forever changing my relationship with the natural world. Up until that point, I had considered myself a preservationist. However, Alaska Natives' struggle for traditional subsistence rights taught me that land use is a crucial part of environmental sustainability.

Protecting resources sometimes means using them. This is especially true for forested lands, whose owners often lack the resources and know-how to harvest their trees, so they sell to developers instead. When I returned to the Lower 48, I had a newfound understanding of how sustainable development and racial justice are inextricably linked. Equality and empowerment mean the freedom to choose and impact how resources are utilized for current and future generations. For many BIPOC communities, these rights have been for so long oppressed.

When it comes to African Americans, our rich history and legacy as stewards of this land are marred by Jim Crow. My grandfather escaped this racist violence in his hometown of Chase City, Virginia, leaving behind acres of heirs' property that my family struggles to manage. I only learned of this by chance when researching for this project! It is no wonder that the current discourse on land development often renders African Americans invisible. Little is known about Black families like mine who own forested lands, let alone actively engage with business and government to develop their lands sustainably.

The agency and ingenuity of the Black family is a theme throughout my career, from the NPR oral history tour *StoryCorps Griot* to the critically acclaimed Sundance documentary *Whose Streets?*. Our everyday families, fighting not only to survive but to thrive, animate so much of America's progress on justice and equity. I believe that, ultimately, the same holds true for the future of our changing climate.

In centering rural African American voices and experiences, *Family Tree* aims to ignite interest and energy among Black influencers who drive so much of the conversation in America. General audiences will be invited to rethink the meaning of sustainability, reclaiming the concept from the sterile confines of UN assemblies and university classrooms. Sustainability means family, land, ownership, and intergenerational wealth.

Family Tree is a timely and vital film project that reclaims the essential role African American families have had -- and continue to have -- in creating sustainable lands for us all.

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ARTISTIC STATEMENT

Close-ups of the shared family features on faces. Tracking shots of joyous children playing in the woods. Racked focus between sun-kissed foresters and their eager trainees. *Family Tree* is an intimate, character-driven, vérité portrait of North Carolina families and communities coming together to heal themselves and their lands.

Family Tree's imagery aims to disrupt Black people's dissociation from the land. The film makes minimal use of the static, establishing drone shots endemic to climate emergency docs. Instead, audiences follow our camera's birdseye view down through the forest and to our protagonists' POV on the ground, cutting to more intimate portraiture of families tending to their lands. Our camera recreates the long-lost bonds of intimacy between families and their forests. Wide-angle shots of the generations at work and play show just how tough the task is at hand.

Viewers also see the world from the perspective of the forest lands. Low-angle macro photography foregrounds trees, grasses, and wildlife, denoting the eyes of the natural world. Timelapse photography takes audiences through the passage of time, pensively shifting scenes from day to night. Return visits over the span of North Carolina's four seasons track the life cycle of the forests — birth, life, death, rebirth — and act as a metaphor for our protagonists and their family lives. Healthy families equals healthy forests.

The Jefferies sisters, Nikki and Natalie, struggle with their estranged father, Sidney, to clear the overgrown thicket of underbrush on their property, while the Williams family maintains an award-winning tree farm at their aptly named Fourtee Acres. "A River Runs Through It," Robert Redford's 1992 classic about a family that makes common ground through fly fishing, is a major inspiration for our family drama's visual tone and style.

And much like how the award-winning Netflix series "High on the Hog" breathed new life into the food travelogue, *Family Tree* reimagines the predominant environmental justice narratives in documentary storytelling. Our film's aesthetic takes cues from literary movements like Afrofuturism and Solarpunk, rejecting both climate nihilism and militant activism for more hopeful yet pragmatic futures.

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ABOUT THE PROTAGONISTS

The Jefferies Family

Sisters Nikki and Natalie Jefferies grew up together on the outskirts of Sanford, North Carolina. Forty-three-year-old Nikki is the eldest and often serves as a spokesperson for the pair, while Natalie, 41, is the softer-spoken of the two. The girls were raised at the edge of a densely forested plot in their grandmother Nellie Newby's home. Before her death, Grandma Newby deeded the property to the sisters, skipping their parents' generation. Natalie is motivated to bring the forest back to health for her 5-year-old daughter, Avery, who will inherit the land one day. However, Nikki has taken the lead on rehabilitating the land, moving back to Sanford to oversee the efforts. Sidney Jefferies, a lifelong tree pruner and Nikki and Natalie's 63-year-old father, has also moved back onto the property. After separating from their mother, Edith, Sidney became estranged from his children, nearly disappearing from their lives as they entered adolescence. These painful memories have not been forgotten. As work on the land begins, the sisters watch Sidney closely, looking to see if he has truly changed his ways and is ready to become a reliable presence in their lives.

The Williams Family

Tyrone Williams took over the Williams Family Farm in Enfield, North Carolina, in 1994. His family has owned the parcel for generations, achieving 100 years of continuous operation in 2016. Tyrone takes great pride in this legacy, naming his 45-acre plot Fourtee Acres, an allusion to the US government's failed promise in the aftermath of the Civil War. The name is also a clever mnemonic honoring his wife and sons: Trevelyn (Tre), Tremaine, Tyron, and Edna. Tyrone and Edna, both 65, grew up in Enfield. As they began building a family, they radically reimagined Fourtee Acres' existing landscape of tobacco and cotton. Focusing on sustainability, they began planting what would become a certified tree farm and growing specialty vegetables from their "high tunnel," a less energy-intensive alternative to a greenhouse. Tre, Tremaine, and Ty are often found helping on the family farm, although all three have careers outside of agriculture. As Tyrone and Edna near their retirement, Tyrone finds succession of the land increasingly on his mind. Can he instill in his sons the love of the land that was passed down to him through the generations?

Sam Cook

As the Executive Director of Forest Assets at North Carolina State University, 61-year-old Sam Cook dispels common misconceptions about forest health and sustainability, teaching students and forest owners alike about the healthy life cycle of trees. Sam advocates for prescribed burning, which contributes to the general health of the ecosystem and slows the increasing threat of forest fires. He has worked in both the private and public sectors and firmly believes that the two support and uphold each other. Sam explains that the roots of modern-day forestry are in capitalist enterprise, and a thriving forest provides landowners wealth, security, and environmental sustainability. After working across the country, including California and Alaska, Sam declares that in North Carolina, "We have the right to practice forestry."

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Mavis Gragg

Mavis Gragg does not describe herself as “outdoorsy,” although she hails from a small town in the Appalachian Mountains. She is a lawyer and former program manager of the Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Project (SFLR) at the American Forest Foundation. SFLR is a network that encourages small-scale, multigenerational landowners to hold onto their lands by practicing sustainable forestry. Mavis walks families through land titles, deeds, and succession plans. She specializes in Heirs’ Property law, which applies to cases without clear title. In these instances, the land is subdivided among family members, becoming more susceptible to exploitation. The decade-old network continues to expand its community of forest families despite an unfavorable legal framework, now contributing to the rise of predatory private interests.

Alton Perry

According to Alton Perry, retirement is more a reset than a vacation. Sixty-two-year-old Alton has chosen to spend his golden years crisscrossing the state in his trusty pick-up truck, advising disadvantaged and underserved landowners on the finer points of forest management. He is at the forefront of a movement to stop the unceasing trend of Black land loss in America, which has left African Americans with 95% less land than they owned a century ago. As the current director of SFLR at Roanoke Electric Cooperative in North Carolina, Alton coordinates landowner conferences and tours and connects property owners with technical assistance and services. He trains landowners on the basics of managing forests and cultivating tree farms, providing opportunities for carbon capture and other sustainability practices.

ABOUT THE ISSUES

Forest Facts

The general US population has long-held inaccurate beliefs about trees and forests. Some activists and campaign NGOs have leveraged these long-standing paradigms to perpetuate erroneous messages. The general public deserves to know the science and the facts.

- [Trees have a life cycle](#) like humans. When they are growing, they sequester carbon. When they age, they will die and should be cut down for other uses.
- Once a tree is cut down, it [still stores carbon](#).
- Forests need to be ‘cleaned’ and [thinned to maximize their ability](#) to store carbon.
- Unmanaged, [untouched forests lead to problems](#) like wildfires and bug infestations.
- Prescribed burns have been [utilized on North American forests](#) for millennia and are essential tools for forest health.
- The US Forest Service estimates that federal land management agencies complete an average of 4,500 prescribed burns annually, and [over 99% of those are successful](#).

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- Although they occupy about one-third of U.S. land, forests currently balance only 15% of our country's carbon emissions. Studies suggest this number [could be nearly doubled through carbon-smart forest management](#).
- Every dollar spent on planting and caring for a community tree [yields benefits that are two to five times that investment](#)—benefits that include cleaner air, lower energy costs, improved water quality, stormwater control, and increased property values.

The Value of (Black) Landownership

More than half the forest land in the United States is owned and managed by some 10.6 million private forest owners. Private forest landowners:

- Control more forest and woodland [than any other group](#). 39% of America's forests are privately owned;
- Supply nearly [30 percent of the water](#) we drink;
- Provide over [90 percent of America's domestically-produced forest products](#), including the timber needed to build homes and fuel wood for heating them; and
- Support [2.4 million jobs](#), primarily in rural communities.
- It's estimated that the compounded value of the Black land lost from 1920 to 1997 is roughly [\\$326 billion](#).
- The remaining African American-owned rural land is [estimated at a value of \\$14 billion](#).

Heirs' Property and Black Land Loss

Heirs' property is passed to family members by inheritance, usually without a will or estate planning strategy. Overall, a substantial number of Americans do not have wills or estate plans:

- Studies show the rate of dying without a will ("intestacy") is [between 40 and 70 percent](#).
- 64 percent of White Americans made wills compared to only 24 percent of African Americans. Even the most highly educated [African Americans surveyed had much lower rates of will-making](#) than the least educated white respondents.
- The Federation of Southern Cooperatives estimates that [60 percent of African American-owned land](#) is held as heirs' property.
- Owners of heirs' property are [particularly vulnerable to losing their land](#) because they are subject to a legal action called a "partition action."

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- Heirs' property is most predominant among African American landholders, [contributing to land loss from 16 million to 4.7 million acres](#) over the last hundred years. There was a nearly [90% decline in African American land ownership](#) from 1910 to 1997.
- The rate of African American land loss has been far greater than for other racial and ethnic groups. It is a significant factor in the [wealth gap between White and African American populations](#). African Americans have 10 percent of the wealth of White Americans.
- The Uniform Partition of Heirs Property Act (UPHPA), completed by the Uniform Law Commission in 2010, [contains legal protections for heirs' property owners](#).
- As of January 2023, [22 states and the Virgin Islands have passed the UPHPA](#), including Alabama, Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Iowa, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, South Carolina, Texas, Utah, and Virginia.
- Although the UPHPA was introduced in the North Carolina legislature in 2022, [it was not enacted](#).

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

Jennifer MacArthur, Director and Executive Producer

Jennifer MacArthur is a filmmaker exploring the impact of our changing climate through the intersection of documentary and genre film. "Family Tree" is her directorial debut.

Previously, Jennifer produced the critically acclaimed feature documentary "Whose Streets?," which premiered on DAY ONE of the 2017 Sundance Film Festival and sold to Magnolia Pictures. She has also produced for TIME Studios, Soledad O'Brien Productions, and Anonymous Content. She is a 2018 IFP Cannes Producers Network Fellow and 2016 Sundance Creative Producing Summit Fellow and a member of the board of directors for Storyline Media, an award-winning multi-platform, participatory, and interactive storytelling company.

Jennifer is a recognized expert in media engagement, a 2015 Creative Change Leader, and a 2015 Rockwood JustFilms Fellow. Over a ten-year period, she helped define the field with impact campaigns for "Traces of the Trade" (POV, 2008) and "Gideon's Army" (HBO, 2013); engagement strategy for the ITVS social TV platform OVEE; and thought leadership for the Impact Field Guide, Impact Tracker, and StoryPilot, among others. Her work also took her to Amsterdam, Melbourne, and Guadalajara for keynotes addressing systemic racism, big data, and low-fi transmedia. Jennifer sits on the advisory board for Harmony Labs, a media research institute founded by BuzzFeed co-founder John S. Johnson.

Doc Society selected Jennifer for its inaugural Impact Producers Retreat in 2012. With Brenda Coughlin, producer of the Academy Award-winning documentary thriller CITIZENFOUR (HBO, 2014), Jennifer established the peer support network Impact Producers Group. They also launched Impact Socials, a networking event for creative change-makers. Jennifer's commitment to artist development kept her

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active on the festival circuit as an industry delegate, a Lab Leader for IFP Labs, and an advisor for Sundance Labs, Tribeca New Media, and the Mozilla Foundation.

Jennifer is a graduate of The New School's film program in New York City. She lives and works in Los Angeles.

Rupert Maconick, Producer

Rupert Maconick is the founder and executive producer of award-winning production company Saville Productions. He has produced hundreds of projects for big brands with high-profile filmmakers, including Martin Campbell (Casino Royale), Barry Levinson (Rain Man), Werner Herzog (Grizzly Man), and many others.

Saville produced a feature-length documentary for Shopify called "Own the Room," collaborating with Emmy-winning directors Darren Foster and Cristina Costantini. "Own the Room" is streaming on Disney+. Saville also produced the feature-length documentary, "5B", for Johnson and Johnson, directed by Academy Award nominee Dan Krauss. "5B" won the Entertainment Lions Grand Prix at the 2019 Cannes Lions and was purchased by Verizon Media for theatrical distribution. "5B" is also the first brand-sponsored documentary to premiere at the Cannes Film Festival. Saville also produced the Werner Herzog documentary "Lo and Behold: Reveries of the Connected World" for NetScout. "Lo and Behold" premiered at Sundance and was purchased by Magnolia Pictures for worldwide distribution. The film won the 2017 Grand Clio, 6 Cannes Lions, and a D&AD Pencil.

Other Saville projects include a global World Cup film for Adidas, directed by Fernando Meirelles (City of God); "Takumi," a one-hour documentary for Lexus, directed by Clay Jeter (Chef's Table); and a 35-minute Werner Herzog film for AT&T, "From One Second to the Next." Recently, Rupert produced the feature thriller, "Memory," starring Liam Neeson and directed by Martin Campbell. Saville also co-produced the sports comedy-drama, "Eddie the Eagle," starring Hugh Jackman and distributed by Fox and Lionsgate.

Geeta Gandbhir, Executive Producer

Geeta Gandbhir is a multiple award-winning filmmaker. She started her career in narrative film under Spike Lee and Sam Pollard. After working for eleven years in scripted film with the likes of the Coen Brothers, Robert Altman, and others, she branched into documentary film.

As Director, she is currently working on the series "Eyes on the Prize" for HBO and the series "Little Brown Girl" for Paramount. Some of her recent work includes "Lowndes County and the Road to Black Power," which was nominated for a 2022 Critics Choice Award, won a 2023 SIMA Award, and is streaming on Peacock. She also recently directed and show-ran a 4-part series for HBO titled "Black and Missing," which won a 2022 NAACP Award for Best Directing, a 2022 Independent Spirit Award for Best Documentary Series, a 2022 ATAS Honors Award, and a Cinema Eye Honors for Best Series. She also recently directed a film called "Apart" with Rudy Valdez for HBOMax, which was nominated for an NAACP Award and won a 2022 Emmy Award. Her 2020 short film with Topic Studios, "Call Center Blues,"

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was shortlisted for a 2021 Academy Award. She directed an episode of the five-part series "The Asian Americans" for PBS, which won the 2021 Peabody Award.

Other projects include directing the six-part series "Why We Hate" for Jigsaw Productions and Amblin Entertainment for Discovery, the feature documentary "I Am Evidence" for HBO, which won a 2019 Emmy, DuPont, and ATAS Award, and the film "Armed with Faith" for PBS which won a 2019 News and Documentary Emmy. In 2017, she directed an episode of the Netflix series "The Rapture" on rap artist Rapsody. In 2016, her feature documentary, "Prison Dogs," which she co-directed with Perri Peltz, premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival, and her film "A Journey of a Thousand Miles: Peacekeepers" premiered at the 2015 Toronto Film Festival and later aired on PBS as part of the series "Women, War and Peace." She also co-directed and co-produced the series "A Conversation on Race" with The New York Times Op-Docs, which won an Online Journalism Award for Online Commentary, an AFI Documentary Film Festival Audience Award for Best Short and garnered a MacArthur Grant. She was also a co-producer on the HBO film "The Sentence," directed by Rudy Valdez, which won a 2019 Primetime Emmy.

As Editor, her films won two Emmy Awards, 4 Peabody Awards, and one Academy Award.

Rafael Roy, Director of Photography

Rafael Roy is a third-culture filmmaker. His work is deeply informed by his roots as a Filipino-American born in Queens and raised by activist immigrant parents from Manila. As a cinematographer and director, his lens often focuses on the periphery—documenting cultures outside of the mainstream—illustrating solidarity in our desire to connect and belong. In 2018, he graduated from the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism, where he studied documentary film and served as the Co-Chair of Equity and Inclusion. He is the cinematographer for several feature-length documentaries, including "Lady Buds," "Ferguson Rises," and "Midnight, La Frontera," and is the director and cinematographer of "Cipher," a short documentary exploring the vibrant culture of TURF dancing in the Bay Area, California.

Hannah Choe, Editor

Hannah Choe (she/her) is a documentary editor whose recent credits include FAMILY TREE (Full Frame and Hot Docs, 2024) and EAT BITTER, which was nominated for a CPH:DOX Award and was an official selection at Hot Docs, IDFA, Visions du Réel and DOC NYC in 2023. She was also an editor on CROSSINGS (Hawai'i Intl. Film Festival and CAAMFest, 2021). Other notable credits include additional editing on EMERGENT CITY (Tribeca, 2024) and associate editing on THROUGH OUR EYES (Sesame Workshop and HBO Max, 2021), TANGLED ROOTS (Tribeca, 2020), GEOGRAPHIES OF KINSHIP (CAAMFest, 2019) and DARK MONEY (Shortlisted for Oscars, Sundance in competition, 2018). In 2018, she was a contributing editor at the Sundance Documentary Edit and Story Lab and a Karen Schmeer Diversity in the Edit Room fellow. Originally from the Bay Area, she currently lives in Brooklyn with her tuxedo cat, Pierre.

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Wendell Hanes, Composer and Executive Producer

Emmy Award-winning composer Wendell Hanes is known for his versatility and extraordinary flair in sound design. With over 2000 commercials, 35 films scored, and another 30 projects supervised, Hanes has made his mark in multiple genres and formats of music composition. Among his notable works include the Television Academy Honors Award-winning HBO series *Black and Missing*, the Emmy-nominated Netflix sitcom *Family Reunion*, and award-winning documentaries like *The Remix: Hip Hop X Fashion*, *The Sit In: Harry Belafonte Hosts the Tonight Show*, and *The Killing of Breonna Taylor*. Having won every major award in advertising, including Clios, Cannes Lions, Effies, Addy's, London International Awards, and Golden Award, Hanes' company Volition Sound has worked with almost all major brands and networks, from McDonald's to Pepsi to ABC and HBO. Winner of a Sports Emmy in 2021, he has produced and arranged several of ESPN's flagship musical themes. A hardcore hip-hop aficionado, Hanes has collaborated with rappers like Drake, Nikki Minaj, and Yo Gotti to create unique soundscapes with his classical scoring and unique sound design.

Kelin Verrette, Story Producer and Production Sound Mixer

After a career as an archeologist working at sites across the United States, Kelin Verrette earned a master's degree in museum studies at San Francisco State University. Her thesis work took her to Oaxaca, Mexico, where she explored the power of community memory and collective representation. These experiences have shaped her perspective as a filmmaker and a storyteller. Kelin co-produced and edited the short documentary, "Cipher," and is the director of the forthcoming film, "The Green Run," a feature-length documentary following the women on the frontlines of fighting climate change in her home state of Louisiana.

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CREDITS

Directed By

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Produced By

Rupert Maconick

Executive Producers

Geeta Gandbhir

Wendell Hanes

Jennifer MacArthur

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Jameeda Rucker
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Darius Davis

Drone Operator

Wilson Land

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Adam Booher
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STRING & CAN

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VOLITION SOUND

Composer

Wendell Hanes

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Dan Kramer

Nikita Sakino

Music Supervisors

Tony Aliperti

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Songs

“Bloodline”

Performed by Gabriels

Courtesy of Warner Music UK Ltd

By arrangement with Warner Music Group Film & TV Licensing

Written by Jacob Ezekiel, Ryan Hope

Published by Apistogramma Films [BMI], Jacob Lusk LLC [ASCAP]

Administered by Songs of Kobalt Music Publishing, Kobalt Songs Music Publishing

“Nature’s Ratio”

Written by Slowly Rolling Camera

Performed by Slowly Rolling Camera

Courtesy of Edition Records

Under license from Sentric Music Limited

Archive Producer

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	Tremaine Williams	

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Zavion Buie	Perfect Lovers	The Murchison Family
Diplis Butt	Chaitra Powell	The Newby Family
Elmer Chesney	Myra Quick	The Outlaw Family
Veralynn Covington	Christian Rindler	The Payne Family
Terrika Crosby	Roanoke Electric Cooperative	The Richmond Family
Vivian Evans	Rocky Mount Event Center	The Rivera Family
Alesia Fladger	Karmyn Sessoms	The Smith Family
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Susan Headen	Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Network	The Thomas Family
Rita Hite	The Anderson Family	The Tuck Family
Ronnie Hooker	The Baldwin Family	The Williams Families
Omoyemeh Jennifer Ile	The Boykin Family	The Wilson Library at UNC-Chapel Hill

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James Lewis, Ph.D.
FR Manly
Forest Stewardship Council™

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The Davis Family
The Dorsett Family
The Evan Family
The Everett Family

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SUPERCOLLIDER

All Solid Things 

Franklin + Fuller

MODULE



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FAMILY TREE

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