

## **Melungeon Voices Podcast Season Four Transcripts, Episode Three: Joshua Outsey**

**Heather Andolina:**

This episode of the Melungeon Voices Podcast is dedicated in memory of Doris Jill Carson. Jill, along with her husband Ron Carson, founded the Appalachian African-American Cultural Center, as well as other impactful initiatives across the Appalachian region. Jill Carson's memory will live on in the hearts of all who were fortunate enough to know her and her significant and tireless work will serve as education and inspiration for generations to come.

**Lis Malone:**

Welcome everyone to the Melungeon Voices podcast presented by the Melungeon Heritage Association. My name is Lis Malone. I am the producer for the podcast and I am here with the one and only, the magnificent, the ever so effervescent and giggly Heather Andolina, president of the MHA. Heather, how are you this week?

**Heather Andolina:**

I'm good. I'm good. How are you doing Lis?

**Lis Malone:**

I'm always good. Not always, but I try. I aspire for good.

**Heather Andolina:**

There you go.

**Lis Malone:**

But you know what? It is always good times when you and I are here and we get to record and bring another episode of the Melungeon Voices Podcast to everybody, so no complaints.

**Heather Andolina:**

That's right Lis.

**Lis Malone:**

So we're here at episode three and yeah, we are starting to round some of these bases in this season already. It seems to always go by so fast. To start off this week's episode, before we jump into your interview subjects, we have another update, which is great. We love to hear about the happenings with our former guests, and this week we have something from Dr. Melissa Carver from last season.

**Heather Andolina:**

Yes. Some more exciting news. Dr. Melissa Carver from last season, episode seven, informed me that she is planning on hosting an aspiring author summit that will be coming soon. If you are interested in attending or learning more, you can sign up for the newsletter to be the first to know by visiting her website at [www.drmelissacarver.com](http://www.drmelissacarver.com).

**Lis Malone:**

Dr. Melissa Carver, she is a brilliant and fascinating person, so enjoyed our interview with her last season and hanging out with her at the Union Conference not this past year, but the year before, I got to meet her in person.

**Heather Andolina:**

Yes, you did.

**Lis Malone:**

Yes.

**Heather Andolina:**

And then she did speak at our conference back in June. She's also a speaker.

**Lis Malone:**

I'll tell you, she is a mover and a shaker.

**Heather Andolina:**

She sure is.

**Lis Malone:**

She's always got some good stuff cooking, so definitely check out her website and then you will get to participate in her next event. Good luck Melissa on that. And so now let's go fast-forward to present day and what we're doing this week. Who are we talking to?

**Heather Andolina:**

All right. Well, today we are talking to Josh Outsey. Joshua Caleb Daniel Outsey has been an actor both on stage and on television. He is also a dedicated community organizer and hip-hop recording artist and performer. Joshua is a co-founder of SEEED, which stands for Socially Equal Energy Efficient Development in Knoxville Tennessee. For over a decade, he has worked as an advocate for racial equality and economic and environmental justice in and around urban and rural Appalachia. He continues to promote diversity and inclusion through his artistic performance and creative writing.

Currently, Joshua is a new employee on the archive team at Appalshop. He has been researching and documenting the history of black churches throughout Central and South Central Appalachia. He lives in Big Stone Gap, Virginia with his wife and daughter. In today's episode, Josh and I talk about Appalshop and the non-profit SEEED and these organizations' importance in elevating diverse and inclusive Appalachian voices for change.

**Lis Malone:**

Let's listen in.

**Heather Andolina:**

Hi Josh. I'm so glad to have you with us today

**Josh Outsey:**

And I'm really glad to be here. So thanks for having me.

**Heather Andolina:**

Yes, definitely. Josh, I like to start interviews off with a question about how guests learned about the Melungeon people, and I definitely want you to share about what you shared with me about what you discovered at this year's MHA Union Conference about your possible Melungeon ancestry, as well as your personal connection to Appalachia.

**Josh Outsey:**

Yes. So I do want to start by saying for the record, there hasn't been a record that directly connects me to Melungeon heritage, just as I think the way that maybe a few people with Melungeon heritage may also know that it's really hard to specifically pinpoint where the people come from. But my heritage is very similar.

And I recently discovered a photo on [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com) that showed me a guy who would be my grandmother's great-grandfather who was from Roscommon, Ireland. I can definitely see the relation, like we have the same nose. And also just to know that my grandmother's mother, I've also seen pictures of was a very like-complected woman. You can't really just look at a picture and say, "Okay, this person appears to be from here." She had so many different features. That's always raised the question for us, "What are we and where do our people come from?" To actually pinpoint someone who came from Ireland that's in my family for me means a lot because, listen, anyone who knows me knows that I'm a pretty Afro-centric person. I walk around rocking dashikis and [inaudible 00:06:50] all the time. So to find out that I'm 30% European has been something that's just been mind-blowing, but I've been embracing it all.

**Heather Andolina:**

And what about your connection to Appalachia?

**Josh Outsey:**

Okay, so this is funny, but I was born and raised in Birmingham, Alabama in a town called Smithfield. And there's always been a statue of Vulcan, the god of lightning. Basically, if you know anything about Birmingham and the economy, it was steel was the whole thing. And it sat right at the edge of the Appalachian Mountains right at the foothills. It was almost as far south as you could go, and I had no clue that the hill I always grew up looking at was a mountain. I didn't know that I had ever even seen an actual mountain until I actually came to Benham, Kentucky. And it was years later when I was 28 years old, and it was in 2014 when I really started to identify myself as an Appalachian.

But before then I had lived in Berea, Kentucky. I had lived in Knoxville, Tennessee. And I have never left Appalachia at all. I've always been an Appalachian my whole life. And it was just crazy. I was 28 years old before I started to identify as an Appalachian.

**Heather Andolina:**

That's great. That's great. You are a project documentation coordinator at Appalshop. What is Appalshop and what does Appalshop do?

**Josh Outsey:**

Great question. Appalshop is an organization that was actually founded back in 1969 and the goal was, it really started off, it was just a workshop where people came together to learn how to use film and media. Of course, it was right in eastern Kentucky in the coal fields, and it was just a solution to where coal mining had once been one of the only trades that you could have. And this guy came from Yale and he came down and he started teaching these Appalachian people how to use video cameras and things. And they started to counteract the narrative that had already been displayed. You ever seen shows like the Beverly Hillbillies or any type of cartoon or that displayed Appalachian people as low-class or uneducated? Well, they specifically wanted to create their own media and art and it just developed into Appalshop.

Hence, Appalachian Film Workshop, it was smushed together and formed Appalshop. And it's been around longer than I've even been alive. But it's over 50 years old. Yeah, it's been great to be added to the team here at Appalshop. I've been here for about one year now. That's been really cool for me to work for a place with such a rich history and with such meaning and purpose. Like, gosh, that means so much for a person like me, and I can explain what that means a little later.

**Heather Andolina:**

Well, that leads me into my next question. How did you get involved in Appalshop?

**Josh Outsey:**

You know what, I'm going to give you the most hippy-dippy answer I can find. But the stars were aligned and it was always somehow written in some greater plan that I didn't create. But I find myself connected to Appalshop through most of the places I've ever lived. It was like something was leading me where I'm now.

But specifically, when I was 15, I left Birmingham, Alabama in hopes for more opportunities. I moved in with my sister who lived in Berea. Let's just say that being at Appalshop now, I'm always finding connections back to Berea. Like all the time. In my work and my research. So that was the first thing I think that set me up to be here. I can't leave out ... you can't see, I'm wearing this bracelet on my arm and it says SEED on it. S-E-E-E-D three E's, and it stands for Socially Equal Energy Efficient Development, which is the non-profit that I co-founded with my friends in Knoxville back when I was twenty-two years old.

We did green job training and development. So it was that experience in the non-profit world and as a cultural community organizer that I think put me on the right path to do this work. With my going out and interviewing folks and going door to door reminds me of the listening project we did at SEED back in 2008. It was a project where we sat down with residents and we actually created a documentary with people voicing how they felt about the prices they were paying for their utilities. Just that experience alone, I ended up applying for a job through the Highlander Center for Research and Education in 2014, which took me to the coal camp, this town called Benham, Kentucky. And I worked on the Benham Energy Project for one year. Basically my job was to go door to door and do surveys and do interviews.

Like I said, it was one thing that led to the next, that led to the next, and I just ended up having the experience that I think they needed. And I had a lot of friends who worked for Appalshop already, so my name came up and next thing I know they were pulling me in. I had started a volunteer project and then after about a year or so into the project, when more funds were needed, Appalshop carried on the role.

Well, first they offered a grant that I applied for, and then I received enough money to cover my salary to begin doing the work. And then I was given the great news six months later, hey, they were

considering actually hiring me on full time. And it's really just blew my mind. This wasn't anything that I expected or even felt worthy of. So I've been dealing with that. But it's just been such a humbling experience to be here at Appalshop and work among so many great activists and artists and people that ... I don't know, I really feel so connected to the work and the region, the area. I just don't feel like I could find a better place. If I was going to work anywhere that I didn't start myself, I just don't think I'd find a better place than Appalshop. So best fit, so far, I think.

**Heather Andolina:**

Well Josh, it definitely sounds like it was meant to be. And what are some projects that you are working on at the moment?

**Josh Outsey:**

Okay. Right now I've still been in the process of working on the same project, which is, well, for the lack of a better name, I've just been calling it the Appalachian Black Church Research Project, and it is what it sounds like. But doing that work, I've had the opportunity to travel somewhere about 250 miles, give or take, of an area that has been pinpointed by the Appalachian Regional Commission to be, what is the Appalachian part of Southwest Virginia. I've traveled from Gate City as far out as Covington.

**Heather Andolina:**

Oh, wow.

**Josh Outsey:**

And we've been out to Wytheville and far out beyond that. But just documenting black churches. One of the reasons why I think it's great that I've been doing this work, well, as an African American in Appalachian, one of the narratives that we counter all the time now is that there aren't Black people here. And I don't know if anybody else is sitting around in the huddle saying, "You know what? Ain't no black people here." But I know that as a Black person, whenever I move anywhere, I notice if there are a lot of people that look like me there or if I stick out like a sore thumb.

And really, because of how Appalachia is so vast, it's so easy for Black folks to kind of hide out in their own little pockets and areas, so by looking at establishments, churches, that were founded, some before the Civil War, you start to see, hey, black people are not only here, but they've been here the whole time. Part of the narrative that I'm shedding the light on is really teaching myself and other Black folks that we're not alone when we come here. Because I've always, from the time I lived in Berea, to the time I always had this narrative to other Black folks back home is, "Hey man, there's so few of us, or there ain't a lot of us here." Which raises so many concerns. So many folks where I come from look at me like I'm crazy when I say, "Yeah, man, hanging out in the woods today." Stuff like that.

But it's really cool because it's teaching me something and it's empowered me to be able to learn that I can teach other people that, yeah, we're here. We've been here. These establishments have existed, and it's evidential proof. I love working on that project. I've been working with Mr. Ron Carson and Dr. Bill Turner of the Appalachian African-American Cultural Center in Pennington Gap. So really how this work started, it was so funny to me, I know I'm going to sound like the girl from the Nickelodeon cartoon That's So Raven, because I see these visions sometimes. I went to the center in Pennington one day as a visitor, my first time there, and I sat back and I watched Ron and his late wife, Ms. Jill Carson, explain to myself and a group of people what their work was and what they did.

And it was like right then I had my, That's So Raven moment, of me and my wife basically continuing their legacy and carrying on their work. And it wasn't long that some of the older folks in town started just handing me records and things. And then I had already met Dr. Turner, and so we had talked before, and so he put me on this project to start figuring out the information and location and contact information for all the black churches in Appalachia. That was the assignment. So we decided to start small with Southwest Virginia, and that's where I was. So after about a year of volunteering on that project, like I said, funding found me, and then here I am.

**Heather Andolina:**

That is excellent, Josh. And we had Ron on the podcast last season, so I cannot wait. Yeah, I'm looking forward to that.

**Josh Outsey:**

Oh, yeah. It's a really cool project. There are some churches that I found out just learning the history of these places they're so fascinating. I kept mentioning that there were churches that were founded around the time of the Civil War before. Well, Bundy's Chapel is a place I do believe it's in Castlewood, Virginia, and every year members of the Bundy family, and they have different last names of course, because that's just how families are. But from, I think the youngest people from ages, babies that are being held in their parents' arms to older people that are nearing 99, 100 years old, they all come back every year and they have this family reunion at the church.

And most of the people I've talked to, their last name is Bundy. I just think that's just a beautiful, wonderful thing that you can have something like that exists here in this region. I think there needs to be a light on it. But just learning the history of the gentleman who was a person in the Bundy family who founded the church, who had a story of his life was very similar to Moses in the Bible. This baby who was found in a picnic basket floating up a river. I can't recall his name, but he was a member of the Bundy family who actually started the Bundy Chapel Church. That's just one of very many really neat stories about black Appalachian churches that are here.

**Heather Andolina:**

So Josh, I want to get into something. Appalshop is in Whitesburg, which is located in the Southeastern part of Kentucky. During last year's podcast recording sessions, we had several of our guests mention the devastating floods, which hit Southeastern Kentucky in late July of last year. Appalshop was also directly impacted by last year's terrible flood. Would you tell us more about what you experienced?

**Josh Outsey:**

Yes. I had been working at Appalshop for about six months, so I was still riding this cloud of, here I am, I just got hired to work at my dream job and everything's going well. A part of the research that I was doing was out in, I think Wytheville maybe, so my wife and daughter and I, we went out that way, and on our return trip, we got word that there had been a flood that affected that part of Eastern Kentucky.

And when I actually was able to place my two feet there and my eyes, it was more devastation than I've ever seen or expected in my life or anything I could ever even imagine. And it was very sad. I had a difficult time dealing with what I was seeing. Most of the homes and businesses in that area had been very much affected by flooding. And you could see that people had their personal belongings outside on the street and every place that you passed by, including Appalshop. And I mean, I had just been coming to this office every day the week before the flood happened, and the floodwaters rose up to bottom of

right where the place that I was using for my office, it had almost made its way up to the second floor just about. I think it got up about eight feet or so. But that was high enough to flood our vaults. And not completely destroy, but it definitely left a mark on the archives that we have been collecting.

We have maintained thousands of archives of films and artifacts, videos on the 16mm film and some of the old-fashioned film that is hard to recreate. And the water itself wasn't the biggest problem. It left behind mold and mildew. And let's just say that that's what we're speaking of when we say devastation. Okay? There was a lot of illness that people were dealing with, people who were trapped in the floodwaters. So my wife and I, we live in Big Stone Gap and we are members of an environmental organization called SAMS, Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards, and SAMS has a mutual aid program. And so from Virginia, we decided to gather up supplies and materials along with all the other efforts that were being made.

We came over with our truck full of bottles of water, feminine hygiene supplies, food, and clothes and things, and there were so many people bringing things in. That was the first thing that I saw, how the community was jumping in to respond to this crisis that was happening. And I want to share this part of a story that was an experience for me because there were people who did not know ... I had not been one of the victims of the flood, so I went into this place where they were housing the flood victims and we were taking them things that they needed, and I needed to charge my phone. And one of the people in the room said, "I've got a charger, but you have to sit here on this cot."

So in this room, it was a gym of a school that they had sat aside and there were people and their pets, over 50 people, all in this one space on cots sharing this space. And they had food and stuff that had been provided for them that were in styrofoam containers. And as I sat down on the bed, this one woman moved very close to me and reached into her styrofoam box and handed a sandwich to me and put it up to my face and said, "Baby, you want a bite?" And I realized even in that moment, how much, even in a time of need like this, here you are, people are still willing to give and help somebody.

And that was more of a testimony. She had no clue that I was there to try to come to the rescue and try to give them things that they needed, but she was more concerned about what I needed in that moment. And that was just a moment that really spoke to me to sit there on that cot and hear their stories, to talk about pets being lost, to talk about older people that didn't have contact with their family and friends, and they were trapped in their rooms, trapped in their houses, trying to stand on top of furniture. You know what I mean? Praying that somebody would come and rescue them. Just all kinds of devastating tales, that I said, you could never imagine, really. And it's really hard to pinpoint just how much devastation there really was during the flood.

#### **Heather Andolina:**

Like I said, we were recording during that time and we had several of our guests comment, and I myself born and raised in Kentucky, I'm a Kentuckian and I had family affected, and it was such a huge impact on Appalachia itself. But you still found a beautiful story within the devastation of how community comes together to help one another. How are things now in Southeastern Kentucky more than a year later after the floods?

#### **Josh Outsey:**

Things are finally piecing itself back together, especially over in Whitesburg. Folks are showing just how strong and resilient they are. A lot of the businesses that were doing well before seem to be picking themselves back up and continuing to go strong. Some places have had to relocate, but very few. But I know, we've opened a new office in Jenkins, Kentucky, so yeah, I'm really excited about that. There is a

lot of excitement at Appalachia around that, that we have a new office space and offices for everybody on our staff, so that's cool.

But no, like I said, there has been some change, but in some cases, a lot of people have just been pushing to go back to normal.

**Heather Andolina:**

Josh, is there anything else that we didn't cover or that you would like to share with our listeners?

**Josh Outsey:**

Well, yeah. So I talked about myself identifying as a Black Appalachian. I don't know if I spoke about myself as a family man. That title is one that has been new to me. I've been married for five years to a woman who is a powerhouse here in Southwest Virginia. She was born and raised here, and we have a daughter together. And the work that I do, I feel so passionate that I'm collecting history that my daughter can call her own.

I'm always joking and talking about my little barefoot Appalachian mountain baby. But she definitely was born and is being raised here in the mountains, and I'm just so excited to have that be a part of my life and the legacy that I leave, is that my daughter gets to learn about Appalachian culture and can feel a strong connection to it and not have to be 28-years-old when she finds out she's Appalachian. She gets to maintain that identity now.

**Heather Andolina:**

Well, Josh, you're doing a wonderful job. Your daughter is absolutely adorable.

**Josh Outsey:**

Thank you so much. Oh, and I also wanted to talk about the fact that I'm a musician. Hip-Hop has been a big part of my life, and it's really hard for me to ever talk about being Black in Appalachia without talking about hip-hop, because for so long, one of the narratives is that there are just limited amounts of music as far as it relates to African Americans.

You rarely get into conversations about any music other than gospel and traditional Negro, spiritual music, mountain music and bluegrass. And all of that is wonderful, and I love all that music, but I have to also say that all of that music also ties into a hip-hop culture that exists here. So actually, I just returned from performing a show at Wiley's Last Resort, that's land that was established by Mr. Jim Webb, who was one of the founders of Appalshop. Actually, we were just out there, I rocked the show at 11 o'clock last night. It was one of the best performances I've ever done. I'm so happy to be able to say that I'm doing hip-hop music in Appalachia. I just feel like it would be crazy for me to not mention that.

**Heather Andolina:**

Yes, because I've got to check you out.

**Josh Outsey:**

Yeah.



**Heather Andolina:**

Josh. How can our listeners learn more about Appalshop, your and your wife's organizations and your music?

**Josh Outsey:**

Okay. For more information on Appalshop, you can check out [www.appalshop.org](http://www.appalshop.org). For more information on my project, you can go to the Appalshop website and you can search the archives for Black Church Research or Black Church Project, or even my name Josh Outsey. And everything I said will pop up there.

To find out more about SAMS VA or Virginia Organizing where my wife works, you can go to [www.sams.org](http://www.sams.org), [www.virginiaorganizing.org](http://www.virginiaorganizing.org). And to check out more music for me, my music is under the name Kaleb NFI K-A-L-E-B-\_-N-F-I. I'm on Instagram. And you can check out one video I have released called JG Wentworth. It's on Spotify and all the digital media platforms. So you can check out Kaleb NFI, JG Wentworth, and that would be it. Yeah, there's more information to come.

**Heather Andolina:**

Well, Josh, we want to thank you for taking the time and speaking with us today. We hope to see you and Appalshop at next year's MHA Conference.

**Josh Outsey:**

Well, you're very welcome, Heather, and the pleasure has been all mine. And thank you for your time as well. Thank you for allowing me to come on this podcast and share a little bit about my life and my work. This has been so wonderful, and we also look forward to being with you next year.

**Lis Malone:**

You've been listening to the Melungeon Voices Podcast. On behalf of myself, Heather Andolina, and the entire MHA Executive Committee, we'd like to thank all of those who participated in making this episode possible. For more information, you can visit them on the web at [www.melungeon.org](http://www.melungeon.org). That's M-E-L-U-N-G-E-O-N dot O-R-G. The information, views and opinions expressed in this podcast episode do not necessarily represent those of the MHA. Melungeon Voices is presented by the Melungeon Heritage Association. All rights are reserved.