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Deep roots

Oakland Tribune, Sep 27, 2006 by Scott Hocker, CONTRIBUTOR

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LL IT TOOK was a single research paper. When David Roach, the founder of Oakland's Mo' Better

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Food who spent most of his childhood in Foster City, was working on his bachelor's degree at Morehouse College in Atlanta in the early 1990s, he wrote a paper on economic solutions for African-American communities.

It wasn't long into his research process that he discovered there weren't many solutions.

Instead, most of the materials he encountered focused strictly on the problems.

Fast forward to 2006, and Roach is a man obsessed with solutions. Mo' Better Food, the organization he started in 1996 to connect African-American farmers with inner-city residents in need of a supply of fresh produce, continues to make an impact in Oakland's lower-income communities 10 years after its founding.

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Sparked by that fateful research paper, Roach, along with Tony Dorsett and Bryan Phillips, formed the nonprofit Familyhood Connection in 1994.

His inspiration was the Lunda people of central Africa, who used kinship ties as a way of solving community problems. As he was researching the Lunda, Roach also read about the decline in African-American farmers in the United States. In 1992, the U.S. Census reported that there were only 18,000 African-American farmers left in the States. There was also a history of devastating land loss for African-American farmers.

Inspired by the work of the Federation of Southern

Cooperatives, which helped 1,000 African-American farmers sue the USDA in 1990 and 1997,

Roach decided to take the next step.

"I wanted to tell people what was

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happening to our land and our farmers," says Roach, who speaks with the easy conviction of someone clear in his mission. "Then we could possibly rally them to reclaim these kinds of institutions for the community."

He also saw a correlation between the African-African population's declining health and the plight of the farmers. "I started finding more and more evidence that showed the connection between the rise in diseases such as diabetes and prostate cancer and the lack of fresh fruits and vegetables in the African-American diet."

Roach formed Mo' Better Food in 1996, with the intent of bringing African-American farmers together and providing them with a means of getting their food to the public. The organization's first major breakthrough came in 1998 when he attended a rally in Sacramento to protest genetically modified foods.

There, Roach struck up a conversation with Desmond Jolly, director of the UC Small Farm Program at UC Davis, and Dr. Sharon Nance of the USDA. The two had heard of Roach's plans, and Nance invited Roach to speak with Will Scott Jr. of Scott Farms in Fresno.

"I went down to Fresno to meet him, and we decided that we should start hosting a market," says Roach.

The Mandela Market, now named the Mo' Better Food Market, was born in the spring of 2003.

Scott, who is also president of the African-American Farmers of California, is a fixture at the market near the West Oakland BART station, as is Leroy Musgraves who farms in Livingston. On a recent Saturday, Musgraves was selling pristine leaves of chard and kale and bright-yellow canary melons with the vines still attached. Scott, and his daughter Michelle, had multiple tables full of okra, onions and sweet potatoes. The Saturday market sometimes has light foot traffic, but that doesn't worry Scott.

"It takes time to really put things in position," he says. "The mechanism should have been thriving long before us. We'll arrive slowly. We're putting in shape what should already have been." Slow or

not, the market has its fans. "It's wonderful," says Claudine Wright, who teaches at the Preparatory Literary Academy of Cultural Excellence @ Prescott nearby and buys produce at the market often.

"I see a lot of parents bringing their kids here."

Produce for restaurants

In an attempt to broaden the ties between the farmers and the

community, Roach has begun providing local restaurants with produce from Mo' Better Food. The neo-soul restaurant Farmerbrown in San Francisco is a client, as is Blackberry Bistro in Oakland's Glenview neighborhood. "I grew up in Berkeley eating food fresh from my

grandmother's garden," says Robert Dorsey III, Blackberry Bistro's chef and owner. "In the concrete jungle, that's hard to come by." Dorsey finds Roach's efforts laudable. "The community is embracing David's efforts because he's exposing children and families to a way of life that we've gotten away from in our era of McDonald's and Taco Bell."

To change the way the next

generation thinks about food, Roach has established ties with preschool and elementary schools in Oakland. He's arranged student field trips to Scott's farm in Fresno, to teach what a farm is like and where food actually comes from. This year, he's working with local YMCAs to emphasize the connection between diet and exercise.

Endless possibilities

Roach sees the possibilities as endless. "I want gardens popping up in schools. I'd like to see high school students interning at grocery stores that actually sell fresh produce. I want to see the younger generation interacting with the older one. I want to see a chain of stores similar to 7-Eleven but with organic food that comes directly from the farmer. We're even looking to duplicate the same thing in Sacramento."

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