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Mo' Better Food and The Mandela Farmers Market

West Oakland, California

In 1999, a class-action suit by America's black farmers won what some called the biggest civil rights award in United States history. The U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C., ruled that the USDA had systematically discriminated against black farmers in awarding loans and other government assistance. The judge estimated that $2 billion in restitution would be awarded.

As of August, 2004, only $814 million had been paid to 13,445 black farmers, and 80,000 applicants had been rejected. Public groups accused the USDA of wrongful resistance and called on Congress to press the ruling into real effect, though they knew that official action could take years—if it happened at all. David Roach, for one, decided not to wait.

David is not a farmer but a former schoolteacher in West Oakland, California. The city is largely a picture of urban blight, with high unemployment and an anemic economy that supports little more than corner stores selling liquor and cigarettes. "Normally the story is that the kid goes to Safeway, sees an ear of corn, and thinks it comes from the supermarket—not the farm," David says. "That's sad, yes, but a lot of the children here haven't ever seen corn before, because they don't even have a supermarket. It's so bad here. It's amazing that it's this bad."

David considers this not just an urban emergency. What he sees is two halves of one community that are both suffering: just as West Oakland is crumbling, so are the black farmers in California struggling to survive. Of the more than 74,000 farmers in the state in 2002, a mere 278 were black. "I saw that the rural needs the urban, and vice-versa. If you keep them separate as in our community, it just gets worse," he said. "You can't fix the farmers' situation in rural areas alone. We need people in the inner city looking after them."

He started the organization MoBetterFood, with the simple objective of creating a "self-sufficient network" between African American farmers and African American communities, based initially on local farmers markets. The idea is revolutionary, for instead of giving each side handouts as the government would, it gives them something much more powerful: control.

"We just realized that a lot of problems would solve themselves if communities played a role in the food industry," David says. "Unlike with the USDA suit, there's no way to deny us. We're not asking anyone to sign something on paper and allow us to do this. We're just having the community come out and buy and sell its own food."

At the core of the program are the Mandela and East Oakland Farmers Markets. They are a far cry from their cousin across San Francisco Bay, the tony Ferry Plaza Farmers market, a favorite of magazines like Gourmet and Sunset. Mandela, which takes place on a burnt-out street outside the West Oakland subway station, is unlikely to attract tourists anytime soon. But, as local activist Dana Harvey explained, "This is not about creating just another shopping experience. It's about drawing on the resources the community has to offer and turning the whole thing into a bigger, combined community resource."

The markets were designed to reflect the true culture of the neighborhoods they serve. To begin with, all the farmers and vendors are African American—not by mandate, but because that's the community. Leroy Musgrave is a nutritionist and the son of Southern sharecroppers, who now works five acres by himself in Merced County. Will Scott is the founding president of the African American Farmers Association, and farms with his wife, Brenda, in Fresno.

The farmers don't sell baby spinach or goat cheese, but rather foods that belong to the neighborhood's Southern tradition, like peaches, peanuts, and black-eyed peas. Leroy even sells lamb's quarter, a wild plant that most farmers eliminate. The average customer wouldn't look at it twice, but Leroy sells out every time. He explains that it has ten times the calcium of milk; plus, that calcium is more digestible. This is especially important to African Americans, who are predisposed to lactose intolerance. "Basically all black women from the South have eaten it," he says. "To them, it's not a weed."

The rest of the market follows the same pattern. Farmers' produce is supplemented by a nearby community garden's harvest, which is sold by the teenagers who manage it. The market takes place at the subway station because that's convenient to this community that relies on public transportation. The market entertainment is often David at his turntables, playing songs from Lionel Ritchie's "Easy" to Aretha Franklin's "Young, Gifted and Black." The vendors accept not just cash, but Food Stamp cards and WIC vouchers, because often those are the dollars that these customers have to spend.

To be honest, the community often doesn't spend as much as farmers might hope. As Dana said, "The farmers who aren't here for community-building drop off pretty fast. If they're just here for profit, it doesn't hold them." In mid-July, Leroy and the Scotts were the only farmers with stands at Mandela, but neither had any intention of leaving. "I do this because we're in an emergency right now," Leroy said one afternoon, sitting behind a stand that had been all but emptied by the morning's visitors. "I don't make a lot of money,

but I don't want to sell anywhere else. I want to bring this food to the people who need it."

Will Scott, who sells to wholesale companies and runs a popular farm stand in Fresno, also stays on for something beyond money. "To see the expression on people's faces when they taste something that hasn't been blasted with chemicals—that keeps me coming. The vine-ripened tomatoes get them every time. As long I sell enough to cover my expenses, I'll keep coming."

Of course David is out to see that it not remain a labor of love. He says the markets are meant mainly as outreach efforts to show the community simply that African American farmers exist in California. Alongside the direct sales, David is linking growers to other avenues for their produce. So far a corner store and a brand-new, family-owned market in East Oakland have begun selling the Scotts' produce, and David is working on several restaurants and nearby Laney College to do the same. Mobile Market (the project of another community organization) buys from the markets then drives the produce to nine stops around the city—a vegetable version of the ice-cream truck. Another local group buys from the Mandela farmers, then resells the food in makeshift farm stands outside schools and hospitals.

While these efforts aim to enlarge the customer base and thus the profit, David also seeks to recognize the farmers' commitment with a system outside raw money. Using its visibility and influence as a non-profit, MoBetterFoods appeals to the public to donate or help purchase equipment that the farmers can't afford to buy outright. Leroy, who works his five acres entirely by hand, is in the market for a tractor and has already received help installing a water pump. The Scotts need a 40' cooler that will allow them to expand their business beyond a single day's harvest.

As part of the seemingly endless cycle of appreciation, the farmers reciprocate by participating in MoBetterFoods' educational activities. Plenty of local kids have never been across the bridge to San Francisco, but through the program now many have visited the farms where this produce is grown. Leroy and the Scotts have even visited the schools themselves, to talk about things like how corn plants pollinate themselves and what vitamins a tomato holds.

The lessons kids learn in these visits go beyond mere biology, back to that essential connection between a

community's urban and rural sides. David says that being around the farmers has opened even his eyes. He explains with a quote, fittingly, from George Washington Carver, an African American who is among America's most important agriculturalists of all time. "Learning about plants and how to cultivate them is valuable to everyone," he says, "for even if the child does not become an agriculturalist, or a farmer, these things have the tendency to make the child think, and that is what we are trying to teach them—to think."

Organization:

Mo' Better Food

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Regions:

☑ California

Organization type:

☑ Program - non-profit