

May 2006 | Features

## Real Food 4 Real Hunger

*Bringing nutrition to needy neighborhoods*

by Traci Hukill

One afternoon in 1995, Oakland teacher David Roach was talking with one of his high school students when he had a life-changing realization.

"She was feeding her child some candy," recalls Roach, a slightly built 40-year-old with waist-long dreadlocks. "I said, 'Hey, why are you feeding your baby candy?' She said, 'Mr. Roach, where can I go to get him an apple or an orange?' That's when it hit me. We gotta create food for this community."

As a student at Morehouse College, Roach had long mourned the rate at which black farmers were losing their land, but now his attention shifted to the urgent need for nutritious food in black urban neighborhoods. Within the year Roach had started Mo' Better Foods, bringing African American farmers to Oakland to sell sweet potatoes, collard greens, purple-hulled peas and okra every Saturday. He remembers how people reacted. "We could see the eyes of people who were just amazed to see a real business in this community," he remembers.

Not to mention real food. California is the nation's fruit and vegetable basket. It has an agricultural sector worth \$25 billion a year and 77,000 farms growing some of the most nutritious crops ever to spring from the earth. But it's a fact of life that in many African American neighborhoods throughout the state it's impossible to find fresh produce. In fact, sometimes it's difficult to find a grocery store at all. The liquor stores and corner stores are there, all selling chips, cookies, sodas, candy—maybe limes for Coronas—but they don't bother with apples and oranges, much less chard and beets.



### Hope After All for LA's Biggest Urban Farm

Twenty years ago, the city of Los Angeles, via eminent domain, forced developer Ralph Horowitz to sell 14 acres he owned in South Central Los Angeles for a trash-to-energy incinerator project. Neighbors balked. Who wants a fume-spewing industrial park next door? After community objection reached a vociferous peak, the city backed down, opening the derelict acreage temporarily to neighborhood gardeners. In an area where junk food and liquor were plentiful—and fresh produce nearly non-existent—this was a huge boon.

When Horowitz found out what happened,



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Human bodies crave vitamins and minerals that can be found only in fresh fruits and vegetables. The result of a diet low in nutrients but high in sugar and fat is depressingly well documented in statistics on obesity, diabetes and hypertension. Minority communities suffer the most. A study by the California Center for Public Health Advocacy found 28 percent of fifth, seventh and ninth graders across California are overweight. In Compton that figure is 37 percent.

"They've been totally denatured," says Anna Marie Carter, the "Seed Lady of Watts," of the neighborhood kids who come to her organic gardening education center in the blighted Los Angeles neighborhood. "If I cook food for them, they can barely swallow it. Their taste buds and their digestive systems can't even let organic collard greens get in there. They get sick. They eat fast food, junk food. They don't eat. They drink sodas in place of food. And it's not one of 'em or a group of 'em; it's all of them."

The organic food movement that brought farmers markets and the mantra "locally grown seasonal produce" to the affluent white towns of coastal California hasn't reached the poor neighborhoods of LA and the Bay Area. But slowly a handful of dedicated people are making headway in changing the toxic food systems found in those places into living, nourishing ones.

Since 1997, when the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District first introduced salad bars stocked with produce from nearby farms, the national farm-to-school program has taken off. About 250 schools in California now serve fresh fruits and vegetables from local farmers at lunch.

Two ambitious programs, which both happen to be spearheaded by famous chefs, have taken the concept a step further by creating on-site kitchen and teaching gardens to supply the cafeterias. With the help of Alice Waters, the Edible Schoolyard at Martin Luther King, Jr. Middle School in Berkeley has been growing food since 1996. In Los Angeles, students at Twenty-fourth Street Elementary School are planting a half-acre kitchen garden this spring in a project co-founded by Nancy Silverton of La Brea Bakery fame.

Meanwhile, a patchwork of grants, partnerships and limited projects throughout the Los Angeles Unified School District is endeavoring to take the teaching garden idea to many more school campuses.

It's hard to overestimate the importance of training kids to eat well, says Andrea Azuma of the Center for Food and Justice at Occidental College. "The reason things like farm to school programs are so

however, he took the city to court, arguing that he should have been given a chance to buy back the land once the incinerator project had been scrapped. Since South Central suffers one of the worst park-to-people ratios in the US, this was a prime opportunity for the city to argue that green space was an even more urgent need than an incinerator. But that didn't happen. Instead, in 2003, the city sold the land back to Horowitz and his partners for about \$5 million, in a hush-hush, below market price settlement. Horowitz then notified the farmers they were being evicted.

Meanwhile, the garden at 41st and Alameda has flourished as a beloved local gathering place, a green oasis of 350 family plots growing bananas, fruit trees, sugar cane, nopales cactus, cabbages, maize, squash and a variety of Mesoamerican plants and herbs. On weekends the plots are packed with families weeding, planting and harvesting crops—a verdant refuge in the midst of industrial wasteland. On any given day at the farm, you might find a couple harvesting mostaza (mustard greens) or a grandma cutting *camomila* (chamomile) for tea that she says reduces stress and cures a multitude of ailments. Sunday afternoons, everyone gathers for tacos, enchiladas and soups made on site with freshly picked vegetables. Some also barter or sell hand-made crafts and produce, while children run and play happily along the garden paths.

With so much to lose, the South Central Farmers challenged the eviction in the courts, claiming the city's secret deal violated certain codes. But the courts kept ruling in the landlord's favor, and when the state Supreme Court declined to hear their last appeal in October, the farmers' fate looked bleak. It wasn't until the Trust for Public Land (TPL) stepped in that hope appeared on the horizon. The city and TPL are now in negotiations with Horowitz to sell the land for a fair market price, currently in the \$16 million range. It would be a tidy profit for Horowitz, who has lifted the eviction notice for now. TPL has committed to raising the rest of the funds if a deal is reached, and at press

important is they prepare folks to shop at farmers markets for themselves when they're older," she says. "It gives folks time to reorient their palates."

Kids are where Carter, a motherly dynamo with a soft voice and a heart-shaped face, is focusing her attention. The bleak plain of boulevards and run-down houses that is Watts seems uniquely resistant to best intentions, but for many years Carter has helped people plant gardens there, over 2,000 of them, she says. In 1994 she opened an organic seed store on Crenshaw Boulevard. It folded three years later but Carter soldiered on, opening the Watts Garden Club, where she teaches kids organic gardening, the cooking of pesto and baking of bread, the making of glycerine soap for sale and the keeping down of dresses and pulling up of baggy pants. For a time, disgusted by the state of school lunches, Carter put on "Broccoli for Breakfast," feeding kids steamed broccoli on brown rice with Dr. Bragg's Amino Acid before school. She swears the kids came back with better grades.

Carter has a bigger plan now: to establish a 12,000-square-foot market in the middle of Watts' four big housing projects, with 75 stalls where people can sell the produce and flowers they grow and the teas and soap they make. Details, like funds, are scant. One gets the impression that Carter is pushing this thing through on willpower, faith and very little else.

She knows what she wants the end result to be. "All these little babies come and we teach them how to be urban organic farmers," she says. "When I'm dead and gone there's gonna be all these little farmers everywhere coming up out of Watts."

Throughout the city sit little plots and snippets of land where urban gardens can take root, says Al Renner, president of the Los Angeles Community Garden Council. "We're making a concentrated effort now to put more community gardens in minority communities," he says. The Stanford Avalon Community Gardens in Watts opened last month, and the first acre of an eventual 7.9 acre plot on 111th Street has also broken ground.

"We're having a lot of people from the neighborhood walk up," Renner says. "We have a waiting list. It's just something that's quietly in demand, and politicians don't even see it."

The possible loss of the sprawling South Central Farm at Alameda & 41st, where 350 "survival gardens" may be replaced by a warehouse (see sidebar), will only intensify the competition for workable land.

time, things were looking promising. If this purchase goes through, it will be a godsend for the farmers, as well as the city.

*To contribute to the purchase of the gardens, call TPL at 213.380.4233 ext. 10 or mail donations to 3250 Wilshire Blvd., #203, LA 90010. Please indicate "South Central Farm" on the check. [www.tpl.org](http://www.tpl.org)*  
—Claudia Pearce

### "It's About Community"

A sampling of organizations working to bring healthy food into underserved neighborhoods.

#### **Center for Food and Justice**

An arm of the Urban and Environmental Policy Institute at Occidental College in Los Angeles, CFJ participates in numerous food justice projects and coordinates the National Farm to School program. [departments.oxy.edu/uepi](http://departments.oxy.edu/uepi), 323.341.5099

#### **Community Food Security Coalition**

North America-wide organization seeks to build healthy regional food systems that provide affordable, nutritious and culturally acceptable food for all. [Foodsecurity.org](http://Foodsecurity.org), 310.822.5410

#### **Nextcourse**

A group of Bay Area chefs, farmers, restaurateurs and food justice activists teach cooking and nutrition classes to child care providers, women inmates at the San Francisco County Jail and kids from underserved communities. [Nextcourse.org](http://Nextcourse.org), 415.441.7700

#### **Watts Garden Club**

Anna Marie Carter teaches organic gardening, cooking and more to the children of the LA community. Plans are for a 12,000-square-foot market in the middle of Watts' four major housing projects. [Wattsgardenclub.org](http://Wattsgardenclub.org), 323.969.4740

Larry Bain, the stocky, apple-cheeked, stylishly bespectacled head of the San Francisco organization Nextcourse, has learned a few things since he started teaching cooking and nutrition classes to women in the San Francisco County Jail two and a half years ago. One: tastes change slowly. You can't expect people who've grown up with canned chicken soup to start loving the taste of homemade stock overnight. Two: if you can get someone to a farmer's market she will love it. Three: never use the "o" word.

"Say 'good food' instead," Bain says. "When we talk about good food, 'organic' is at the bottom of our list. At the top is 'fresh.'"

The perception of organic food as elitist hobby is as common throughout the red states as in Boyle Heights, but the obvious ethnic divide at gatherings, like the Eco-Farm Conference in Monterey last January, makes the race issue harder to ignore. Looking out over the crowd of 1,200 attendees, a half-dozen of whom were African American and a few dozen of whom were Latino, Roach said as much. "I don't see many people who look like me," he observed. "I wish you could bring some of the brothers from Oakland here. Too often this information doesn't get where it needs to—in urban centers around the country."

In 2003 Roach moved the Mo' Better market from the high school to 7th Street and Mandela Parkway and rechristened it the Mandela Farmers Market. It's small—two farmers come every Saturday morning, one from Fresno and one from Livingston—but regulars come to scoop up the Southern foods they grew up eating. They even come when it rains. "They like to see you there in the rain," Roach says. "That's how they know it's a long-term thing."

He, too, has ambitious plans. He's looking at turning an abandoned church in West Oakland into a grocery store cooperatively owned by the members of the congregation that used to worship there. He also wants to start bringing together community elders and high school kids to build greenhouses and solar-powered food drying machines.

It starts out being about food, but in the end it's about community, says Roach. "We want to create product we can sell and label so when you bite into that dried peach you eat it with pride because it came from your farm, and you packaged it and created product for yourselves," he told the Eco-Farm conference. "That's all we want. We don't want to think about where that siren is going and where that helicopter is going to land. All we want to know is our children are safe and our parents are protected. That's it."

*Traci Hukill is a frequent contributor to WLT.*



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