

The Fruit for Folks Project: An Urban Farming Response to Local Hunger Background: Obesity, Food Insecurity, and the Rise of Urban Farming

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Just as the global feast and famine induced by the industrial food model have been redefined as conjoined problems stemming from a singular source, obesity and food insecurity in the United States are increasingly understood as phenomena that are no longer mutually exclusive. Counter intuitively, the industrial model's emphasis on producing ever greater quantities of food actually threatens food security, which refers to a person's or community's ability to "have access at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life" (McClintock 2011).

The acceleration of food production in the name of efficiency degrades the quality of our food to the extent that it now deteriorates our health, rather than serving as the source of it. And though we may single out high fructose corn syrup and hydrogenated oils, even fruits and vegetables produced by the industrial model no longer match their organic, seasonally produced, and locally consumed counterparts in terms of health (Ehrenreich and Lyon 2011). On an even grander level, the industrial model fails to capture the dynamism of food as a complex socio-cultural phenomenon by reducing a sustainer of life to a mere economic token, a factor input and output for the amassing of profit.

But how then did the Global North, and America in particular, become so obese? With the transition from one to two household wage earners and the subsequent shift to a reliance on credit to finance a middle class lifestyle during the 1970s and 80s, Americans began to feel the pressures of a lack of time (Rasmus 2006). Our national culture became predicated on the need for convenience. As Paul Roberts argues, "Time not money was now the scare resource" (2008, 35). The availability of cheap foodstuffs (not entirely deserving of the word food) helped to ease the effects of a stagnating wage, thereby making time the most precious commodity for the modern American consumer. Transnationals capitalized on this realization by no longer providing raw foods, but instead the finished product. Roberts notes, "This lucrative transformation of raw commodities [typically grown in the Global South] into finished goods is known as adding value, and it's so ubiquitous today in all consumer product industries that it's easy to miss just how central the phenomenon is to the success, and character, of the food-processing industry" (36). But it is crucial to realize that this food is *cheap*- added value in the industrial food model refers, not to an enhanced quality of the final product, but to the addition of sugars, oils, and additives which will preserve shelf life. Lower prices thus serve as a reflection of industrial efficiency and compromised quality.

As we realize that obesity hardly requires food security, we find that consumers purchasing these 'value added' foods are often the most food insecure. The most vulnerable consumers reside in food deserts where liquor stores have replaced supermarkets and lower income households are increasingly finding consistent, adequate nutrition out of their financial grasp (Patel 2010). In my own Contra Costa County, California, one in six people are food insecure, accounting for a 46% increase in the years between 2006 and 2010 (Sherrill 2011). The latest financial recession has forced one in three food bank aid recipients to choose between paying their mortgage or paying for groceries, necessitating an increase in assistance (Beals and Johnson 2012). Further reaffirming the link between food insecurity, income, and obesity, the Contra Costa County Food Bank, a partner of the Urban Farmers, initiated a partnership with

local after school programs to launch the Farm 2 Kids Program, which aims to combat the onset of childhood obesity by providing three pounds of seasonal produce to each participating child on a weekly basis (3). They state that their program is “an excellent way to get more produce out into a community that could really use it, since over 50% of the students in these schools receive free or reduced lunches” (3). As a contributor to the Contra Costa County Food Bank, The Urban Farmers provide fresh fruits and vegetables to help support such programs. Thus, in establishing the relationship between obesity, food insecurity, and income, we achieve a more nuanced understanding of the hunger-related problems in America, allowing us to look forward to more sustainable solutions.

Urban farming has emerged as one solution to the abuses of the industrial model and inherently adheres to Michael Pollan’s (2006) call for more organic, local, seasonal, and sustainable agriculture. In contrast to traditional rural farming, urban farming refers to the cultivation of crops and livestock in urban spaces and grapples with concerns ranging from the securing of permits to space constraints to soil toxicity. More particularly, in contrast to large scale industrial farming, most urban farms, taking the form of community gardens, eschew any practice which might degrade either the land or those who cultivate it (McClintock 2011). Standing in direct defiance of the environmental, food related, and racial injustices perpetuated by the industrial model, the community gardens I have visited, from Oakland to the South Bronx, share a common goal of not only securing greater food access and security but achieving food sovereignty, defined as “a community’s right to define their own food and agricultural systems” (Alkon and Agyeman 2011). This emphasis on food sovereignty is crucial, as these gardens, more often than not, support marginalized communities living in food deserts where the inhabitants exercise no determination in the quality or quantity of food surrounding them (McClintock 2011). Thus each garden, equipped with its own unique rhetoric of overcoming inequality, represents an empowered commitment to food justice.

Partner Agency Description and Project Goal Statement

Representing another side of urban farming, The Urban Farmers are a grassroots, all-volunteer, non-profit organization based in Lafayette, California with a passion for increasing access to fresh fruits and vegetables for those with limited means. Founded just a few years ago, they support a variety of programs but are best known for their fruit gleaning program. Gleaning, which finds its roots in the Bible, “refers to the act of collecting leftover crops either from farmers’ fields after they have been commercially harvested or from fields where it is no longer economically profitable to harvest”(Fruit Gleaning Program). To give an urban, or rather suburban twist, to the traditional definition, The Urban Farmers harvest the fruit from trees in the yards of those who have registered to become members. The fruit, which would have otherwise burdened the homeowners, is donated to the recipient partner organizations, the Contra Costa County Food Bank, the Concord Monument Crisis Center, Loaves and Fishes, and Lindsey Wildlife Museum. This last partnership with Lindsey speaks to The Urban Farmers’ commitment to sustainability, as any fruit with minor damage which has fallen from the tree may be consumed by animals at the shelter, thereby minimizing the amount of waste.

In order to truly understand The Urban Farmers, it is necessary to understand their commitment not just to sustainability or social justice, but to human dignity. The executive director’s son initiated their current gleaning program in the summer following his freshman year at college, after witnessing the desperate situation endured by those in his community struggling with food security. Rather than seeking more canned and processed foods for donation, he sought

out a means to provide people with fresh fruits and vegetables that were organic, local, seasonal, and sustainably farmed, foods that they are so often denied access to. The success of this initial idea must be attributed to their commitment to a highly democratized work environment which fosters a sense of inclusivity and collaboration, allowing for the free flow of information and ideas.

The Urban Farmers graciously welcomed me for a yearlong partnership to work on their gleaning program. I worked in conjunction with The Urban Farmers for the 2011-2012 academic year to help design and implement a low cost gleaning program to provide fresh, nutritious, and pesticide free fruit and vegetables to partner organizations (Concord's Monument Crisis Center, Loaves and Fishes in Concord, and the Contra Costa County Food Bank) for distribution to those in need in Contra Costa County. I then recorded this design and implementation process in order to share this information with other individuals and communities across the nation for program replication. With these two distinct goal statements guiding my work for the year, I created The Fruit for Folks Project.

The Fruit for Folks Project

The Fruit for Folks Project serves as a replicable program model for The Urban Farmers' ongoing fruit gleaning project. Drawing from the lessons learned, this initiative packages the organizational schema to provide a framework for non-profits, schools, and motivated individuals wishing to begin a gleaning project in their own communities anywhere across the nation. In doing so, the aim was to inspire change on a grassroots level by empowering individuals with a passion for food justice. The initiative consists of a PDF gleaning guide that provides in-depth explanations for each of the steps from committee development and partnership creation to the logistical coordination involved in organizing a gleaning day at multiple sites. It takes into consideration the various capacities that organizations may have to dedicate to gleaning and provides customized explanations for how they might best pursue that venture. Samples and templates for all necessary spreadsheets, flyers, and outreach materials accompany the guide in order to minimize the administrative burden which might otherwise deter people. We are adding to the collection of instructional videos, which range in topic from creating soil blocks and leaf mold to meeting with homeowners, in order to provide a more interactive experience for model users. If any additional questions still linger, they may be addressed directly to my forthcoming blog. The Urban Farmers are currently developing a software program which, once launched, will eliminate a majority of the manual logistical arrangements, resulting in minimal administrative oversight and maximized harvest plans. To further aid the Project, it will be open sourced upon its projected completion in January of 2013.

The commitment to open sourcing speaks to a greater purpose for the Project, beyond perfunctory explanations of the tangible resources it provides. This model intends to better equip those addressing hunger in their communities. It must inherently possess space to grow and adapt in order to respond to the unique assets and needs of each community, and as it changes to better suit them, it will truly become theirs. From the borrowed ancient idea of fruit gleaning, to the lessons learned from The Urban Farmers, to all of the help given by the volunteers, this model's creation and dissemination truly represents collaboration and collective ownership. We must now have faith in the collective responsibility that accompanies collective ownership. The open sourcing of ideas and resources, regardless of their form, will serve as the foundation from which mine and future generations will be able to collaboratively address some of the most pressing

issues our world has ever faced, such as food insecurity, rapid environmental degradation, and climate change.

Narrative Summary of Action Plan

In order to create The Fruit for Folks Project, I began by participating in The Urban Farmers' fruit gleaning program to observe the inner logistical workings involved in organizing each harvest. In its simplest form, fruit gleaning may be reduced to the idea of taking fruit from a point of excess (Point A) and bringing to a point that could make use of the excess (Point B). But despite the simplicity in articulation, there are several greater component pieces involved in actualizing that process. These pieces include publicity, communication and outreach, harvest coordination, website management, and impact assessment and correspond to a number of questions, such as: Where is this excess fruit located? Once we find it, who will harvest it and when will they do so? Who will organize the harvest day, so that the homeowners know that volunteers are coming and the volunteers will know when and where to arrive? Do we have the necessary tools to properly and safely harvest a tree? After we have collected the fruit, where will we take it? Who will have the capacity to transport 1,000 lbs. of fruit? What were the costs incurred during this process? Are there potential partner organizations who might be interested in collaborating with us? How will we publicize this program? What kind of impact did we make on our community, and how will we keep record of it? These questions provide an initial reference point for those interested in beginning a gleaning program.

While the gleaning guide and the general process are laid out in a fairly linear pattern, maintaining flexibility, patience, and open communication channels proved to be key to accomplishing any part of the process. The inevitable snags will be resolved that much more efficiently if the entire team understands the situation and is committed to proceeding. When the process seems to grow too overwhelming – and it might for a fleeting moment – it is important to recall the larger goals of your gleaning program. I can think of no better motivator than knowing that perseverance in times of ease and difficulty ultimately serves those grappling with food insecurity. It is not difficult to harvest hundreds of pounds of fruit in a single afternoon and even have fun while you do it.

After successfully completing a harvest, it is essential to conduct an impact assessment. While measuring the impact of The Urban Farmers' gleaning program, I used quantitative and qualitative approaches and must emphasize that all data collected refers to The Urban Farmers' gleaning program, as the recently developed and ever expanding Project has not yet been piloted in communities outside of California's East Bay. If, however, the existing data serves as any indication of the potential of The Fruit for Folk Project, the results appear promising. In terms of quantitative measurements, records must be kept for the weight of the fruit from each harvest. An additional measurement, which might indeed prove more compelling, approximates the number of people who consume the gleaned fruit. To calculate this figure, divide the quantity for the amount of pounds of fruit harvested by five. In order for food production to meet consumption needs, five pounds of food must be grown per person, though not all of that five pounds will be consumed. Some will inevitably fall to waste, i.e. apple cores, orange rinds, and wheat husks. Thus accounting for waste, dividing the resultant figure by five provides an estimate for the number of people fed an entire day's worth of food.

For example, looking at the quantitative data for The Urban Farmers in the month of August (2012), a total of 2,360 pounds of fruit were harvested in three days worth of harvests spread out over the course of three weekends. Groups of twelve to fifteen volunteers worked for

just four hours per day. Taking the total (2,360) and dividing by five, we find that 472 people who visited the Contra Costa County Food Bank (the recipient of the month) were fed for an entire day. To date, The Urban Farmers have completed seventeen harvests this year. Operating costs, consisting primarily of the cost of transporting the fruit and depreciation of the equipment, have amounted to approximately twelve cents per pound. The Urban Farmers are working to bring costs down to nine cents per pound. This goal can first be achieved by increasing the density of tree registration in a particular neighborhood, as it will cut down on the gas and transportation costs. To further cut this cost, they are raising funds to replace their rusting, yet reliable, 1975 Chevy truck which averages about seven miles to the gallon as it hauls fruit across the East Bay. It is particularly important to realize not only that all of this fruit comes from residential areas, not orchards or large fields, but also that the vast majority of it would have otherwise rotted in the yards of homeowners overburdened by more fruit than they could possibly consume. The work of The Urban Farmers and The Fruit for Folks Project thus represents a redistribution of surpluses to the locations where it is most urgently required. Considering that only six locations were visited over the course of the three harvests, the enormity of the untapped potential is truly astonishing.

The qualitative approach included a variety of mediums, i.e.: interviews, photos, and videos of the volunteers who have participated in the harvests. At a community round table discussion organized by The Urban Farmers in March, the executive directors of each of the partner organizations highlighted the significance and necessity of the fruit gleaning program, which helps to offset the effects of the budget cuts they have endured. David Gerson, Executive Director of Loaves and Fishes in Contra Costa County, described a scene in his soup kitchen where the parents were thankful to have fresh fruit salads included in their children's lunches, rather than canned fruits drenched in preservatives and syrups. But even beyond testimonies that speak to the program's explicit goal, additional interviews and surveys of the volunteers have proven the program's ability to foster a sense of community that had previously not existed. One anonymous response thanked The Urban Farmers for providing her and her neighbors with a reason to reach out to one another and establish a relationship beyond perfunctory exchanges. Though no explicit plan exists to create a sense of camaraderie, The Fruit for Folks Project hopes that a heightened sense of inclusivity and community will necessarily follow from the nature of the work.

Conclusion: The Transition to Widespread Urban Farming

In their most reduced form, urban farming in general and fruit gleaning in particular serve as alternatives to the global industrial food system that promote sustainability through the reduction of food miles and elimination of pesticides. This alternative food system allows for a democratization of the food production process, an impossibility for the industrial, monoculture-based system that monopolizes the status quo. Where the existence of the latter is indebted to costly government subsidies, The Urban Farmers' fruit gleaning program is expanding throughout California's East Bay through the efforts of volunteers alone. With the creation and dissemination of The Fruit for Folks Project, communities across the nation now have additional resources to tangibly address food insecurity and contribute to programs that seek to combat the spread of obesity.

To understand the potential of the urban farming movement, greater structural questions must still be addressed: What degree of capital investment would be required to rebuild a city's infrastructure so that it may function as a food economy (as in the case of Detroit or Oakland)?

What existing resources are available for use? What are the most effective biointensive gardening practices? How can a community sustainably transition to widespread urban farming? Are there other, comparable solutions? How can citizens and other entities reform political systems to remove the influence of corporate food lobbies? Community-based research and service learning opportunities will provide some of the most meaningful answers to these questions, because the nature of the approach will require that theoretical observations in food systems studies are joined to community based efforts to advance food justice. This linkage of academy and community, based reciprocity, is so essential to food studies as a growing discipline, since its very subject – food – sustains the lives of academics and community organizers alike. Their collaboration in the effort to increase food access and security, both locally and globally, thus represents an inclusive approach to addressing one of the most salient contemporary issues.

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