



watering the food

desert



Sometimes you have to grow it to get it

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IT'S EASIER TO BUY FRIED CHICKEN, RED POP AND FLAMING-HOT POTATO CHIPS than it is to find an apple in certain middle-to-low income Black neighborhoods. In fact, visit a certain side of Any City, U.S.A., and you are likely to find the four corners of any given intersection occupied by a fast-food restaurant, a convenience store selling penny candy, a liquor store and a fried chicken shack.

What's missing from this picture is a store selling high-quality fresh produce such as apples, collard greens or broccoli; a store that is affordable and that is not four miles away. Does what's missing sound familiar?

Welcome to the food desert.

In Chicago, approximately 633,000 people, in a city with a population of 3 million, live in neighborhoods that lack a grocery store. Roughly half of Detroit's residents live in an area devoid of a mainstream full-service supermarket, leaving 460,000 people who, without a car or food-delivery service, don't have access to fresh fruit and vegetables. We can throw many more cities with the same problems into the mix: Memphis,

(NUTRITIONALLY DEPRIVED)

(Previous pages) Chicago's food desert includes built-out lots that are ripe and ready for new restaurants and stores. Demolition and construction could make this corner perfect for a small grocer's stand.

Food trash gathers after being blown in the wind and left in a crevice just steps away from a fast-food restaurant and liquor store on Chicago's South Side.

(This spread) A man walks past a recently closed, boarded-up grocery store. The walls are now adorned with old food ads and long-abandoned signs for Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn's election run.

Mom-and-pop shops like Andy's Fast Food can be found on nearly every block. What's for sale? Pizza puffs, French fries, chocolate cake, ice cream sandwiches, gyros and fried chicken wings. It's where everyone goes for a quick hunger fix.



Kansas City, St. Louis, Indianapolis, Baltimore, Atlanta, Richmond, Los Angeles, Philadelphia and New Orleans.

Food deserts are inextricably linked to a host of medical issues in our communities, chief among them diabetes and obesity. Simply put, if we want to live longer, then we will have to eat better. To eat better, we need better food choices. Better food choices come from watering the food desert.

"We know that where there are food deserts, people tend to have poor health outcomes," says Maya Rockey Moore, director of Leadership for Healthy Communities, an organization dedicated to helping communities improve their health profiles. "The design of the community and what isn't in it can determine your health outcomes. People of color have been living in communities that have been without the outlets that they need to live healthy lives."

In addition to a lack of exercise and an addiction to sugar, part of our problem is that large grocery store chains have for years been removing themselves from our neighborhoods. The United States Department of Agriculture (U.S.D.A.) never uses the word "racism" when describing why grocery stores leave or won't build in certain areas, but a recent U.S.D.A. report does say that barriers to new grocery stores in urban areas include local politics, zoning issues, real estate taxes and the difficulties in building in areas that are already built out.

Mari Gallagher confirms those findings. But there's always more to the story, says the president of the Chicago-based National Center for Public Research, which studies food deserts nationwide and in 2006 unveiled a landmark study about the Windy City's food-access problems.

"In some cases, there is racism . . . but it's not just overnight that these grocery stores have gone away," she says. "In other cities across the United States since the '50s and '60s, you've seen more White flight from neighborhoods and African-American populations with resources moving out to the suburbs."

In other words, the grocery stores followed the money away from the inner city, leaving many of us in a not-so-healthy lurch that has morphed into a public health crisis. Consider another U.S.D.A. study released last year: approximately 8.4 percent of the U.S. population, or 23.5 million people, live in low-income areas that are more than one mile from a supermarket. Of the households that are more than one mile from a grocery store, 2.4 million do not have access to a vehicle. No car plus no grocery store plus no money equals poor diet, which equals disease. Couple that information with the findings of a 2006 study published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* that found the lowest rates of obesity, 21 percent, among people living near supermarkets. The highest rates, between 32 and 40 percent, were found in areas with no large grocery stores.

Yet, says Gallagher, there is no need to despair at these findings.

"The problem with these food deserts is they have a negative impact on the quality and the length of life," she says. "The good news is, there is not one single solution needed. Everyone can jump in and do something. This starts with the individual, the home, the block. If we focus on the opportunities, we can look at our glass as half full."

In addition, "Poor people eat, [but] not everyone in the food desert is poor," says Gallagher. "There is money to be made. In Chicago, we've



identified about 2,500 households making more than \$50,000 a year [in neighborhoods without grocery stores]. Some are making \$75,000 or \$100,000 or more. We have to figure out how to make it work.”

DELORES' STORY

The beautiful sweeping mansions, three-story greystones and high-rise apartment buildings that occupy Delores Sullivan's South Side Chicago neighborhood are smack dab in the middle of a food desert. Sullivan, 64, lives in one of those old high-rises. She also has diabetes. She uses an electric wheelchair. She tries to eat fruits and vegetables, but they tend to be expensive and not readily available. The nearest grocery store is six miles away and difficult to access during a hard Chicago winter (or hot summer) on the bus in a rolling chair. And even then, she can't hold that many bags of food in her lap.

“Jewel (the closest grocery store) is high priced,” says Sullivan, 64, adjusting her wheelchair as she approaches her local Walgreens. “And I have to spread my money around. Their bananas just cost too much. And there's so much processed food. I'm guilty of eating too much of it myself. It's just easier to pop something in the microwave.”

Sullivan's story is common, say experts. Even people who as children once ate balanced meals three times a day can fall into unhealthy eating practices if good food is not nearby.

That's why several federal initiatives are underway to help correct the problem.

First Lady Michelle Obama's recent war on childhood obesity is bringing yet more light to the issue of healthy food access. U.S. Rep.

Bobby Rush, an Illinois Democrat, last year introduced a bill, the Food Desert Oasis Act of 2009, that would, in part, grant tax credits to businesses that get at least 25 percent of their sales from fresh fruits and vegetables. And in the Obama administration's 2011 budget is the Healthy Food Financing Initiative, a partnership between the U.S.D.A and the U.S. Departments of Treasury and Health and Human Services (HHS), that would set aside \$400 million for organizations and businesses that want to bring healthier food into communities. If implemented, both initiatives would also create jobs.

“Obama has realized that this is a crucial issue,” says Yolanda Butler, deputy director of the Office of Community Services, a branch of the HHS. The government has plans to rid the country of food deserts in the next seven years, she says.

But top-level leaders say they can't lead the change by themselves.

“Get involved,” says Ed Cooney, executive director of the Washington, D.C.-based Congressional Hunger Center. “Get involved in a local farmers market in your community. If you don't have one, work with people to start one. There are people working to improve the quality of food at the corner stores and in the bodegas in New York and Los Angeles. It's like anything else: If you want a change, you have to organize at the community level and get groups together and demand products that people can afford to buy.”

And on the local level, even stores such as Walgreens are entering the fight against food deserts. The wheelchair-bound Sullivan was recently able to purchase five bananas for \$1 and apples for 25 cents apiece at an outdoor fruit stand that was just implemented by Walgreens, which

A NEW GROWTH
This 8,600-square-foot garden at the Gary Comer Youth Center grows hope in the form of broccoli seedlings that, by the summer, will be ready to eat. Center: Gabrielle Zeigler doesn't mind getting her hands dirty. Right: Working carefully to not damage the existing rows of vegetables, garden manager Marj Hess, left, and Zeigler, right, prepare a center aisle for a potato planting.



typically doesn't sell fresh produce. Those fruit prices tend to be lower than prices found in large Chicago-area grocery stores.

The painfully obvious question, of course, is whether Congress and other pivotal policymakers—such as the multibillion-dollar food industry and the farmers' lobby—will support initiatives bringing healthy food to lower-income communities. These are the same communities that spend millions on the very companies that produce the junk and processed foods that, when abused, lead to obesity.

That's why the U.S. farm policy is a key issue, say food justice advocates. In recent history, farmers were typically given subsidies to grow soybeans, corn and grains. These are important crops, but some naysayers believe that the producers of corn syrup and other corn-based additives profit from the usage of their product in foods that pack in the non-nutritional calories. On the other hand, ethanol production employs more than 300,000 people in the United States.

Food justice advocates say this year will bring more of a balance to the crop offerings because the subsidies were expanded to include so-called "specialty crops," which include broccoli, apples, spinach, nuts and other healthy foods.

Says Rockey Moore: "Until this last federal reauthorization of the farm bill, we didn't have subsidies for specialty crops. Those subsidies went toward the grains and the soybean and the corn. And because of the way that our policies are structured, those industries became basically the dominant force in our food distribution chain. Certainly we need corn and grain, but we also need fruits and veggies."

GROWING PAINS

"Why are you doing this slave's work?"

That's what Black people used to say to Will Allen some 15 years ago when he decided to create Growing Power, a year-round farm in north Milwaukee just blocks away from the city's largest housing project.

The farm today feeds thousands of people who live in food deserts.

And those naysayers? They're now trying to grow their own gardens.

"All of a sudden, we've become very popular," says Allen, 61, who has additional farms in Chicago, currently employs 40 people and has plans to double his employees by the end of the year. "I call it the food revolution because now we've got the first lady on board. I really think this will create thousands of jobs and bring food into communities around the country."

Growing an urban garden is slightly challenging because much of the soil is polluted, says Allen, so would-be farmers have to learn how to compost and how to grow better soil. Once that hurdle is crossed, he says, urban farmers can earn up to \$200,000 a year from a small plot of land.

"You have to be able to grow food at \$5 a square foot rather than acres," he explains, adding that food just one day off the vine is far more nutritious than the 14-day-old produce that most of us get at big supermarkets. "We have to 'grow' new farmers who don't come from rural areas. Right now, it's a lot of talk and planning. But we need some doers. Doers are the ones who make the change. That's why we're training 1,000 farmers a year to go back to their communities and start growing."

LaDonna Redmond, another Chicago food activist, agrees with Allen and is working on the business end to bring a greater variety of food to the community. She hopes to use Obama's new funding to help her with her grocery store, Graffiti and Grub. "The food experience has been missing from our community," says Redmond, who started food advocacy 11 years ago when her toddler son was found to be allergic to most processed foods. Redmond needed to go organic, but on Chicago's West Side, organic was not to be had. "You can't know that you want a Gala apple without being able to taste it."

Urban farming programs such as the one on the roof of



a youth center in Chicago are helping kids to taste—and grow—that apple. At the Gary Comer Youth Center, at least 85 Nike-clad, Coogi-wearing, cornrowed teens are growing flowers, spinach, potatoes, tomatoes, sunflowers and microgreens in an immaculate 8,600-square-foot garden that is sprouting amid the food-deserted Grand Crossing neighborhood.

When the kids harvest their 1,000 pounds of crops, several chefs including Oprah Winfrey's former chef, Art Smith, come to teach them how to cook their veggies. Smith also buys the microgreens for use in his swanky Table 52 restaurant. The kids take some of the food home and sell the rest to neighborhood residents who are happy to buy a head of organic lettuce for 25 cents.

Jamila Burton, 18, is involved in the "Green Teens" club. She now knows where potato chips come from. She has also acquired a taste for red potatoes, basil and thyme.

"It was my first time being introduced to those herbs," she says. "We took those herbs and cooked them with pizza. We actually harvest the potatoes and garlic. That was the first time I made those things, but they were really good."

Burton says her friends and family would eat better if they knew all their food options.

"I think I eat healthier now," says Burton, who lives about a mile away from a grocery store. She doesn't know much about the grocery bill, but has noticed that her mother doesn't always cook what they have in the garden at the Comer Youth Center. "I was able to bring home herbs, garlic and potatoes. But I still go to [the grocery store] and get what I can afford."

A smaller group of kids recently braved a spring Chicago chill to turn over potato earth, plant broccoli buds and compare the growth rates of the organic spinach plants to the nonorganic ones. No surprise, the organic spinach (fed only with molasses and apple

cider vinegar) was much bigger and healthier looking. For many of the students, tilling the earth on this chilly day was quiet and calming and more fun than playing a video game.

"I thought it was just plants and dirt, but now I see that it's life even if it's not human," says Gabrielle Zeigler, 17, planting broccoli buds with her bare hands and not minding the mud getting on her brand-new blue-and-white Nike Shox. Her favorite food from the garden? Strawberries.

Not only are they growing food and changing their own health outcomes, but the teens are learning about potential jobs. The program is funded by a community development block grant given to those who can teach green skills to a new generation.

"This is a chance for them to take an active role in this essential part of their future," says Marji Hess, the garden manager. "As a community revitalizes, having access to healthy food is non-negotiable. I think the youth understand that. They'll say, 'I want to be a hip-hop artist.' But to be a hip-hop artist, you need a lot of energy, and that's not something you'll be able to do on flaming Red Hots."

Help yourself! What YOU can do to water the food desert:

1. **Tell your Congressman** that you support the Healthy Food Financing Initiative and the Food Desert Oasis Act.
2. **Tell your Congressman** that you support federal subsidies for specialty crops.
3. **Visit your local farmers market in the summer.** The more you buy, the easier it is for the farmers to stay in business.
4. **Get involved.** Join a farmers market group or volunteer to help an organization build relationships with farmers so that your area gains access to fresh fruit and vegetables every day.
5. **Grow your own food** on your porch, your yard or in a pot on a windowsill.