

Testimony

of

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Hephzibah Georgia

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Foods and Eliminating Food Deserts

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My name is Karen Gordon, and I am the Empress Of Cool and co-founder of Growing Augusta: Arts, Agriculture, & Agency. We are farmers, artists, and builders of community - agents of change. Our mission is to create a food oasis in South Richmond County. My husband, who just HAPPENS to be named Clarence Thomas is a retired Army officer, and always reminds me to BLUF – bottom line up front. To cut to the chase. And, despite my best intentions, I never do. I will today, however. Today, I will be speaking on the Soul+Soil Initiative, which started with a \$3K mini-grant awarded at a pitch competition, and has evolved into a business and community development concern.

The Soul & Soil Initiative was conceived in 2018 with Carla Walker (One Woman Veteran) over lunch at a South Augusta restaurant. I (or as my son used to refer to me was looking to produce a series of concerts on Black-owned family farms as an agri-tourism promotion, and Walker had been working diligently as an advocate for local farmers, with a penchant for women farmers of color.

No strangers to community activism and service in Augusta, but new residents in South Richmond County, we spoke at length about the dearth of markets and resources in “the neighborhood”... about how most of the resources dedicated to the good food movement were trained on a limited segment of the City, although the areas of most need (& the farmers) lived elsewhere. Having already connected with elected officials and organization leaders, we began the work of identifying and promoting existing resources.

Shortly thereafter, Carla was asked to present a social justice initiative at Georgia Organics’ Potluck & Pitch event, but because she had travel plans, she asked me to handle the pitch. Soul & Soil was re-imagined as a live-work-play resource, developed IN South Augusta and WITH its residents at the helm. A resource in which artisans, growers, and creators can grow their businesses online and within their own communities.

Our presentation relied heavily upon identifying and building food assets (farmers markets, community gardens, urban farms) in our neighborhoods. Here are excerpts from that pitch.

Soul and Soul Initiative is a collaboration between me, Soul Sister Karen Gordon of Garden City Jazz and my ‘Soil Sister’ Carla Walker of One Woman Veteran.

Together, we have a unique opportunity (at the intersection of art, agriculture and technology) to bring individuals and organizations together to transform the way our city and culture connects with food.

By facilitating the work of emerging grassroots organizations, we will provide a platform for creators, makers, food justice advocates, and young people to engage directly with policy makers. Far too often, when policymakers and funders want to hear from the minority communities, they find themselves talking to highly paid corporate lobbyists.

And the reason is simple - socially & economically disadvantaged minority groups don't have the capacity (whether we're talking the ability to attend community meetings that are scheduled during your typical work day.. to lack of transportation.. to lack of media coverage.... And because of this, corporate and grassroots interests rarely align.

Our stories matter, but often fall on deaf ears. And for that reason, WE ARE HERE.

Every innovation exists to solve a problem - changemakers.org

The problem that we are addressing is LACK in South Richmond County... Merriam-Webster defines lack as "the state of being without or not having enough of something."

Dictionary.com says "deficiency or absence of something needed, desirable, or customary"

lack of community engagement, absence of healthy food options, deficiency of farmer-run markets in South Augusta, which is where the farms are, and the scarcity of platforms from which to address these challenges.

Why should we fix it? We fix it, because if we don't, then we will always live in a food desert, even if there are oases across town. The soul of Augusta remains marginalized, and the soil remains dormant. We fix it from the inside out, because, a community without sustainable internal resources remains broken. We fix US because, even if we are living in someone else's oasis... with no understanding of how to create our own, then we are STILL in the desert.

The Soul & Soil Initiative facilitated those important conversations in three phases: a series of gatherings, an educational symposium, and a community festival.

THIS was in 2018. We won the grant. Yaay! It was great. We brought our community partners to the pitch. They stood and confirmed their support And had today's meeting been open to guests, we would've invited our partners to join us. (Our farm group consists of reps from Dyer St Community Garden, Farmer-Musician, La's Healing Garden, Gloria Manor Organics, Sol Nursery, Belle Terrace Presbyterian Church Legacy Garden, Community Guardians, Urban Grange Farm, Earthly Rooted, Wallace's Farm & Homestead, Greater Augusta Black Chamber of Commerce's (GABCC) Black AgriBusiness Initiative would be standing in solidarity.)

BUT... what did we actually do?

My soil sister Carla fell ill a few months later. And because my job was to pinch-hit the pitch on her behalf. Being a jazz musician, I improvised. I tapped my music biz partner, Kigwana Cherry of Pop-Up Augusta! We sat in lots of meetings - our own and those of other organizations. We sat briefly with state Ag Commissioner Gary Black at the 2019 State of The Region address alongside the current Leadership Augusta class. I made a list. We checked it twice. We put my public relations degree and his engineering degree to work and renamed the project GROWING AUGUSTA: ARTS, AGRICULTURE, & AGENCY. I called the county Tax Commissioner's office so frequently to ask about vacant lots that I landed an appointment to the land bank authority board of directors. We talked to farmers, asked questions, and more questions. Already a director for the local arts council and presenter at the 2019 Artists At The Community Development Table workshop, we began to incorporate creative placemaking into our efforts - engaging the artist community. We were intentional about building programs WITH people, not FOR them. I quit my job at the church because it no longer sparked joy. We completed the project, built and branded a website and social media presence, presented updates and hosted pop-up markets at the community breakfast

meetings, submitted a report, then got back to hosting concerts and music festivals. This was 2019 BC - before Covid.

What has changed?

You don't need for me to tell you. Everything. Full stop. Because I own my own business, I don't work for myself. I have 361,978 bosses. Okay.. I made that up. But the truth is, that I serve other people – I am self-employed, but a shutdown of Covid19 proportion doesn't JUST affect me. It affects the hundreds of people I work with AND for. Like everyone here, we had to make a hard pivot. And ask some tough questions. What if normal never comes back? What if this is it?! In the midst of those questions, the answers that I sought a year before began to make sense. We absolutely MUST learn to grow. So, we began to sow/plant seeds. Schools, government buildings, music venues, churches were closed, yet we planted. Markets closed, supply chains were interrupted, and food was wasted. We held plant giveaways in church parking lots and park gazebos and taught folks how to plant vegetables, herbs, flowers. We reached out for help once more. We made another list.

We have a profound opportunity in front of us - to be able to create the reality that we talk about. -christian scott

HERE'S WHAT WE HAVE DONE

The Augusta Market (Saturday Market at River) – programmed live music and arts performances since approx. 2010. The weekly event sees north of 1k visitors each week. As Covid shut down the market last year, we've reimagined our role in 2021 to promote farmer/food demos. Currently, Wallace's Farm & Homestead launched their petting zoo business, and Menia Chester (you'll hear later) hosts a monthly cooking demo using produce sourced from our network or farmers of color.

South Augusta pop-up market – Jamestown, started in October 2018. Host at monthly breakfast meetings. Paused due to Delta Variant

Bus station market – hosted two of these at main transfer station at busy corner of Broad and Greene Streets. In collaboration with New Georgia Project.

South Augusta farmers market - Journey Sherwood. Collab with Keith Walton, whom you'll hear from later. Monthly market, launched in June 2021. Great news. We received authorization to accept SNAP benefits. Just yesterday.

Farmer Co-op meets monthly and is increasing in number and strength as those in attendance connect online and off.

GrowingAugusta obtained a cottage food license (Jan 2021) which allows us to sell value-added products in person and online on Augusta Locally Grown and our own platform. We are a certified Georgia Grown company since March 2021

HERE'S WHAT WE ARE WORKING ON

Working on a partnership with DoorDash to become an official merchant at the downtown market. Consumers would be able to order fresh produce for delivery without downloading another app. Our challenge is that we are offering this feature to local farms first, and working with seasonal produce.

Working with culinary instructor at Technical and Career Magnet School to construct an urban farm on its campus.

Developing a second South Augusta Market in Blythe in collaboration with Housing & Community Development.

GABCC has launched Black AgriBusiness Initiative (BABI) and is incubating a county-wide mobile market system based on the City's existing school bus routes.

HERE'S WHAT WE NEED FROM YOU

Financial incentives for developers to build fruit and nut trees and edible landscaping into their plans for new communities.

Not knocking anyone's hustle, but by placing moratoriums on dollar stores without having grocery markets in place, we end up punishing the very people we intend to help. Why not incentivize the dollar stores to partner with farmers?

Consider amending state and local zoning ordinances to loosen restrictions on urban agriculture to allow small livestock in urban areas, so long as nuisance is mitigated..

We are doing these things with little resources other than our relationships and good faith. Imagine how our world (& worldview) will change when these grassroots efforts are written into policy.

Oh. And the conversation about that little agri-tourism project that got this whole thing started back in 2018? The one with concerts on Black-owned family farms? On July 28, 2021, AARP announced the winners of its 2021 Community Challenge grant. Garden City Jazz in conjunction with the Greater Augusta Black Chamber of Commerce is one of the recipients.

We are farmers, artists, and builders of community - agents of change. Our mission is to create a food oasis in South Richmond County and create a sense of place in this community through healthy and sustainable collaborations. We are growing, Augusta!

When we choose to remain silent until WE have nothing to lose, we must accept that those whom we intend to help may very well end up with nothing to lose, literally, as a result of our inaction. -kgordon