

"Farm Together Now: A portrait of people, places and ideas for a new food movement" was a book published by Chronicle Books in late 2010 featuring interviews and photo essays about 20 farms across the United States. The book was a collaboration between Amy Franceschini & Daniel Tucker, with a foreword by Mark Bittman, Photography by Anne Hamersky & Illustrations by Corinne Matesich, Design by Brian Scott. see farmtogethernow.org

Chapter 18

God's Gang

Chicago and Dawson, Illinois, and Union Pier, Michigan

Organizing body: varies based on projects and available funds

Scale: multiple sites, including urban backyard gardens throughout Chicago, farmers markets, greenhouses on the south and west sides of Chicago, a rural animal farm (Karaal Farm) in

Dawson, Illinois, and crops in Union Pier, Michigan (at Hidden Haven)

Type: nonprofit

Currently producing: worms, cotton, geese, ducks, tilapia, gourds

In operation: since the mid-1970s

Iconic plant/animal: gourds

Website: Godsgang1.net

“No Child Left Inside” is Carolyn Thomas’s motto, borrowed from former President Bush’s education policy No Child Left Behind. There is not a better example of diligence toward this maxim than her organization, God’s Gang.

The group grew out of an impulse to connect with kids in a neighborhood that was largely abandoned by the world around it. Kids have always been at the center of God’s Gang’s work,

making space for their growth and their development as people. They started as a dance group and then morphed into a food pantry, a library, and then a fish and worm farm inside abandoned public housing units. The group was displaced from their facilities numerous times in what has come to be known unofficially as “urban removal” and officially as the “Plan for Transformation” of nearly all of the city’s public housing units into market-rate homes. The age of state welfare is over, and subsidized low-income residents are being flung into the city’s private-housing market to compete with everyone else.

In the midst of this mass displacement, the community cultivated by God’s Gang is also being flung in many directions. But their commitment and savviness earned them access to rural land in Union Pier, Michigan—land they share with On-the-Fly Farm. Their headquarters are now located in Thomas’s backyard in the far south-side neighborhood of Roseland. Greater emphasis is being placed on working with individual families to have backyard gardens or visits to the farmland for an escape from the city.

Tell me how God’s Gang came about.

Carolyn Thomas, founder: We started God’s Gang at St. Mary’s church in the Washington Park area of Chicago in an effort to try to get kids to stop fighting so much. It was the mid-1970s. People who came to the church had been displaced by the building of Robert Taylor Homes, nearby public housing projects. We started by getting kids interested in break-dancing after church. Then we started a breakfast program. People would give us commodities, but we wouldn’t serve them, we wouldn’t serve rice or grits. We’d serve pancakes with syrup,

strawberries, and whipped cream. We just made elaborate, crazy stuff. And people would come!

Once we had a Halloween party. We had a huge pumpkin that was the prize for who could dance the best. I remember a kid saying, “We’re just like the other gangs, only we’re God’s gang.” And that was how we got our name.

Then we wondered how we could get the kids to stay longer at the church. We decided that we could do some gospel dancing—*not* “praise dancing.” The kids would get a record, or Scripture, and they would make their own movements to it. Then other churches started to invite us to perform. We performed in parks and did Juneteenth celebrations.

Then we started doing black history in our own community-centered way. We would ask the kids to find the oldest person they knew in their family or in the neighborhood, and they were to ask that person for the oldest thing they had and bring it back so we could make an exhibit together. We would always get amazing things, sometimes stuff we didn’t even know [the name of] or how it was used.

At some point, we asked the kids, “If there was one thing that you didn’t have to worry about all day long, one thing that you think all of us together have the power to solve, what would it be?” And they said food. So we opened a food pantry and called it Mothers Cupboard.

Eventually we got a grant from the Chicago Area Projects for two thousand dollars, as well as a promise of space in a Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) building. We waited *months*. Finally, the manager offered us a five-room apartment, which we divided into different food rooms, and

we just went from there.

Where were you getting food from at that point?

We got food from the Chicago Food Depository. We had no staff—we relied totally on volunteers. Seniors and people who didn't work, and those who were on assistance, would run the pantry until the kids got out of school and we got off work in the evenings. An AmeriCorps friend would loan us trucks and volunteers for deliveries. That's how we started, moving forty-three thousand pounds of food; the depository gave us the "Pantry of the Year" award that year.

Later Phillip Morris approached us and offered us a grant after taking a tour of our operation. That's how we got our truck. We've never really written proposals, because people just helped us.

How did people find out about God's Gang at this point?

We got very good publicity after moving so many pounds of food that first year with mostly children. We ran out of food after our first grant of two thousand dollars—food was seven cents a pound—we were giving it away so fast.

I think right about there we were a twinkle in Phoebe Griswold's eye, who was the director of the Chicago office of Heifer Project International and who had dreamed of an urban ag program.

Is this when you made the shift from food distribution to food production?

Yes, it was around 1998 or '99. You have to have livestock to work with Heifer Project International. They introduced us to raising worms and fish indoors, and we got space from CHA with new floors, new lights, new everything.

I worked as a United States postal worker and so I lobbied the American Postal Workers Union to donate to us their employee library, since it wouldn't be needed in the new building they were moving to. They agreed. They had desks, every reference volume you could think of, the complete works of Poe. It was marvelous. We got trucks and moved the library to our new space and started offering homework help in addition to all the food-related work.

Then we asked for a third space, because we needed windows and natural light for the fish. We had been bugging Ed Moses, the head of public relations for CHA at the time, about this for a while. Then one day we had a residents' party and he came to visit. I was reading *Amistad* to two children when he came through that day. He said, "This is beautiful!" Then he turned to leave, and he looked to the left. It was where we kept our thirty bins of worms, two fish systems, and three fifty-five-gallon bubbling drums. He looked at Ms. Moore, one of the elders and a resident, and he said, "Ms. Moore, did anyone ever tell you that water and books don't mix?" And she said, "We've been asking for months for the other space, but nobody would give it to us, so we had to put our fish in here, in our library." The next day, the CHA built the worm and fish farm space.

In the new space, we increased to six fish systems—it was really great. I think we also got maybe one hundred beds of worms. A carpenter was helping us put in more windows—and the next day

we were told that our building was coming down.

That's when we started working with the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs to try to save the building. We started spending all of our time trying to stop the demolition of 5266 South State Street. It came down to the last fourteen families in the God's Gang building, and we were holding out. The head of CHA came to us and said, "I don't know where you are going, but you got to get the hell out of here." Everyone told us that we had to go, but Ms. Moore was holding out. My sister would sit with her while I was at work. Then some folks from The Coalition to Protect Public Housing would stay all night, every night. We were there twenty-four hours a day. We even filed a lawsuit to try to keep the building open, but that didn't work. Finally CHA threatened that if we did not leave then we would lose the library, the pantry, and the worm and fish farm. When they moved the security—the police had been there all this time—people started breaking in. They stole the copper out of the huge new refrigerators and freezers. They broke through the walls and took everything of value. They destroyed our computers—the scavengers just took over. It was crazy. And then they set all the worms out.

Someone from CHA did that?

Yeah, someone from CHA moved our worms out into the street. The only thing that saved them was that, the week prior, kids had come for training and had over-bedded them. So we didn't lose them—they didn't die, they didn't freeze.

Then the *Chicago Tribune* wrote about [the incident], and the very next day we moved the worm beds into someone's apartment. We didn't have the library—it had been destroyed. The food

pantry went to a church—it was just a mess.

We just prayed, and didn't worry about it, and one day, somebody gave Ms. Moore a key. Turns out the CHA officials built us a brand-new \$35,000 worm and fish farm. We had the entire first floor. It had twelve windows.

But the overall Plan for Transformation was still taking place, and the building with our new facility was still slated to be demolished. A meeting was set up between our kids and the new head of CHA. He was totally impressed by our work and offered to give us one of the thousands of buildings they had around the city for a dollar. We tried to take them up on this but every time we found [a building that] we liked, there was some obstacle or reason why it wouldn't work. Eventually when they were ready to evict us again we sued. But the legal battle dragged on so long, and meanwhile our families were being displaced throughout the city, and everyone was really challenged by all of this. So I called our lawyer and asked him to settle the lawsuit. We settled out of court for one-fourth of what an independent group had appraised all the work and the work we could have done was worth—something like a million dollars. We were without a home and we spent most of the settlement money in the first three years just trying to hold on to all of our fish, worms, and gardening equipment in storage.

Tell me what projects are going on now and how things have changed since leaving your community at Robert Taylor Homes?

It's totally different. You can't ring a bell and a hundred children show up. It's hard to plan things. To get that particular group together, again, well, it will never be that occasion again.

So now we work with people to grow stuff in their backyards. We're just trying to do one family at a time instead of all of them at once. So that's the way we're approaching it. We touch about forty families every year in one way or another. We just encourage people to grow their own, to not be afraid of growing on their own, and to let the kids be involved so that they'll start eating right.

We have also had land in Dawson, Illinois, at the Karaal Farm donated to us to house our animals. We got some new ones, including goats that were gifted to us by the Angelic Organics Learning Center. Then we have crops in Union Pier, Michigan, at Hidden Haven, which is also generously donated and which we share with some other wonderful small farmers.

How has this new urban/rural connection impacted the families you work with?

It used to be that during the summertime you went down south to swim in a creek and do all those outdoor things. This generation has lost those land connections. Nobody can swim, and they're not eager to get in the water. It's a detriment that we've lost those connections to the wilderness, to nature. We're trying to change that. We take kids out to one of our rural farms on trips and retreats.

Once they're there one day, they always want to come back under any circumstance. I think that's an expansion we never even thought about while we were doing food or even making the gardens until we worked Louise's farm in central Illinois and then interacted with the goats—it's just magnificent. It's a totally different thing. I think the livestock really brings a lot to the picture.

You are also teaching after-school courses out of a greenhouse on the far south side of Chicago. What is your curriculum like?

That space is also donated, by Scott Parker's Urban Farm South—through collaboration is really how we get things done. At the greenhouse, the kids come and learn to make their own soil. They have to start four different compost systems. We give them a worm bucket, they take it home, keep it a week, and bring it back. Sometimes it's disheartening when they come back with it empty because no one has eaten even one meal at home in seven days. That becomes an opportunity for us to talk about the connection between everyday eating and what we are doing with the soil. So then they actually start the compost. They see the cycle from the seed all the way to actually cooking with what they have produced.

Where would you like to see God's Gang in five years?

I'd really like to see us continuing what we do, just on a bigger scale. We need a city site that is not here at my house, that is more formal, that is more of a business. We really could just develop the 83rd Street site we already work with, those five greenhouses, that'd be enough.

On the other hand, I'm just in love with being in my neighborhood right here. I love that people can come in through the gate, get what they want, take it home, and plant it or eat it. I'm not asking anybody to fill out any papers. We're just communing. I hope to get all of our neighbors together to see what each one has done at the end of the season, sort of like you do garden walks but with a focus on food.

Of course I want to increase what we're doing at Hidden Haven and Karaal Farm. I want to be able to bring more kids out of the city and to these places.