

"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 11

Georgia Citizens Coalition on Hunger

Atlanta, Georgia

Organizing body: 5 staff, multiple volunteers

Scale: 2 acres

Type: nonprofit

Key crop: collard greens, okra, squash

In operation: since 1974

Iconic plant/animal: collard greens

Website: Ga-hungercoalition.org

The Georgia Citizens Coalition on Hunger (Hunger Coalition) began by doing community organizing and policy work related to urban poverty. In response to the lack of good food in the primarily African American neighborhoods they were working in, they started a farmers market. They partnered with members of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives to create a connection between black urban and rural people. Following the success of their early programs, they were contacted by the federal government to connect the farmers markets with the Women, Infant, and

Children (WIC) subsidized food program. Eventually they started growing their own food for sale at these markets. The organization is housed out of Community Resource Center, a compound five miles from downtown Atlanta and the hub of the organizers of the first U.S. Social Forum in 2007.

Atlanta is a city at the center of a sprawling metropolitan region of more than five and a half million people. Unlike most major cities, it does not have any natural barriers that can stand in the way of its expansion. The city grew tremendously in the 1990s, partially due to massive investments resulting from hosting the 1996 Summer Olympics. The Olympics, always rife with controversy, were seen by many as an opportunity to rid the city of its poor population. Concurrent with the planning and staging of the games, a massive demolition of public housing occurred, and, according to Sandra Robertson, executive director of the Hunger Coalition, “that’s when the homeless people disappeared. They were literally being given bus tickets out of the state. It was a rough and tough time, and people were in the streets protesting almost every day. Bulldozers were coming and knocking down major neighborhoods to clear way for the Olympics. Relationships were scattered, and people were dismantled, almost like in New Orleans, though not quite as dramatic, but in the same fashion.”

This group of mostly women is undoubtedly family—in their ethos and approach to one another, to people seeking their services or looking to get involved. That loving attitude permeates their work and the atmosphere they have painstakingly created during the last thirty-five years. The

most remarkable trait about their organization is a complete willingness to evolve if their ideas or mission need to go in another direction: first as an advocacy project, then an emergency-assistance hotline, then a food pantry and a support group, then a farmers markets and organizers of the annual Poor People's Day on the state Capitol's steps, then administrators of a social justice community center, and now a farm.

In the early years, the mid-1970s, Georgia Citizens Coalition on Hunger was mainly advocating for the creation and maintenance of programs like WIC, farmers markets, and school breakfast and lunch programs—programs to keep people from going hungry. In the '80s you worked around food stamps and then, as the welfare system was dismantled by Presidents Reagan, Bush Sr., and Clinton, the work changed. Why did you go from advocacy to more direct service and direct action?

Sandra Robertson (SR), executive director: It changed out of necessity. For instance, one day a woman called and said, "Do you all have any food? I have three children and I need food." I said, "We don't have food, but we have some powerful information, and we want to get you involved in helping us change the way the food stamp program is organized." She said, "Ma'am, I want some food. I don't want no conversation!" [laughter] I had a real awakening that day. We talked a lot with her. She gave us a real education about the economy, and we helped her get food and apply for food stamps so that she was able to stabilize her situation. This led to more conversations with the public, and it became clear that we needed some kind of program for

emergency assistance.

We opened a hunger hotline in 1988. The first day of opening, we got ten or fifteen calls from people who needed help. Word got out and the number of calls started to grow. But our capacity was pretty small at that time. We only had enough food to sustain a person for a day or two. We could see that that was not going to be enough. But we also had a number of conversations about how we didn't want to become a big pantry, that we wanted to have more than that. So we started to recruit people to work on issues around welfare, food stamps, social security—and so one thing led to another.

What led the Hunger Coalition to start organizing farmers markets in the early '90s?

SR: At one point in our history, we had a buying co-op that purchased bulk food packages, including produce, meats, and staple goods. We could then offer people the opportunity to get relatively discounted prices on the food. That went really well for a while, but we wanted to try something else to encourage healthy eating and cheaper food packages—and that's when the farmers market concept emerged.

We started doing the farmers markets in public housing communities. We would set up the markets and the community would run them. We would issue \$5 coupons to the community to introduce them to the concept of buying at a farmers market. More people began to ask us to set up markets in their communities. We'd identify the farmers, and the people would develop

relationships with the farmers.

After two or three years, I got a call from a man in Massachusetts who was trying to get a weekly farmers market coupon program started in his state, but he was working at the federal level and wanted to get demonstration projects all over the country. He had heard that we were operating small farmers markets, so he came down to talk to us about getting our state to apply for funding to have subsidized farmers markets. We talked to the Federation of Southern Cooperatives and we appealed to the Department of Agriculture in our state. At first, they did not see a way that they could make that happen. But as time went on, they were convinced, and then somehow or another it ended up as part of the WIC program.

The first farmers market coupon program became so popular that we expanded just about every year. We started operating some of them eventually because we ran out of farmers. And that's where we are today. We actually became farmers.

[begin sidebar]

Federation of Southern Cooperatives

Formed in 1967 as a direct outgrowth of the civil rights movement, the FSC works to encourage black farmers cooperatives and land retention. **At one point, the FSC coordinated the activities of 130 co-ops across the South; today it works with thirty-five cooperatives representing 12,000**

black family farms [Edits OK/accurate?]. Its Rural Training and Research Center in Epes, Alabama, trains people to start co-ops in farm management and in the creation of credit unions for cooperative management of capital. As an organization, it was instrumental in fighting for the fair treatment of African American farmers by the U.S. government, including such prominent cases as Pigford v. Glickman, which resulted in a class-action settlement in 1999. The case argued that thousands of African American farmers were discriminated against by the Department of Agriculture's credit, benefit, and subsidy programs. In 1985 the FSC merged with the Land Assistance Fund and began to focus an increasing the amount of energy on black landownership.

Since the destruction resulting from Hurricane Katrina, the FSC has facilitated trainings on cooperative development for farmers affected by the storm and has served as distributors of resources from food to fuel to equipment donated by other co-ops across the country through its alliance with the National Family Farm Coalition. See Federation.coop for more information.

[end sidebar]

How did the land that you farm and your Community Resource Center come about?

SR: In the early 1990s we had a visioning session with a facilitator who was lent to us by the Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta. Fifteen mothers nervous about the cuts to the welfare system talked about wanting to have a way to control the prices of their food, wanting to have a garden or a farm where they could grow their own food. They talked about wanting to have a thrift shop. They described it like a mall where people could come and have all their

needs met. They also talked about wanting to create jobs for themselves that paid at least \$10 an hour [so that they could] run a large part of the project. That's how our building and farming land came about—because [our people inspired this visitor], and he in turn worked with the Foundation to help us get this place. It's a building in trust. We have a long-term lease for \$1 a year.

How did you go about preparing the land for growing food? What was your plan?

Althea Morrow (AM), Umoja Garden manager: I had been working in the thrift store starting in 2000, and I was fascinated by the garden, by farming, because in my childhood, I thought that I couldn't grow anything. We had a little experiment in kindergarten whereby every child grew a bean in a little cup. Mine was the only bean that didn't grow! So when Sandra asked me if I wanted to become the gardener, deep inside of me I was yearning for it, but I said, "I don't know how to garden!" Neither of us knew how to do anything!

SR: For two years or more, we had a pitiful harvest. We just kept working—we hadn't discovered that our ground wasn't healthy. Althea would tell me, this person says it needs this, or that person says it needs that, and we'd try it out, and then something green would show up, and we'd get excited. We would just learn as we go. A few years ago is when we started to actually grow something for someone to eat!

The Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta had a special Make-A-Wish grant that we applied for, and that's what got us the tractor. And that was great, because it really put us on

another scale in terms of our capacity to till more ground and plant more vegetables.

AM: Each year, we would have a crop or two that would do real good, like okra or collard greens, and those would enter the farmers market. What we can't sell or doesn't look pretty—it's an organic garden, so sometimes the bugs make them look a little funny—goes into the food pantry.

Your farmers markets began in public housing in Atlanta in the mid-1990s. Where do you sell now and who are your customers?

Melissa Pittman (MP), farmers market manager: When I first started doing the market, the farmers would come from southern Georgia, and we would go to maybe four housing projects; women in the housing projects would set up the tables for our fruits and vegetables. As the housing projects started to close, so did the market sites. So for a year or two, I think we might have had only one site, the Bowen Homes.

SR: After most public housing was torn down, people were spread all over the city and the sprawling suburbs of Atlanta. Now we do farmers markets outside of WIC health clinics in the city and the suburbs.

MP: Now it's a completely different group of people. Because the other markets were more community-oriented, everybody knew everybody. The markets now serve people who live near the WIC center. And so they're far out from where we used to set the markets.

[sidebar]

Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)

Established in 1974, this program distributes food and nutritional services to pregnant mothers, infants, and children up to age five. It is facilitated by the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) of the USDA. In most states the program provides vouchers that can be used in food stores, though the availability of all WIC services differs slightly according to state. The FNS is also the entity charged with coordinating programs like food stamps, emergency assistance, and school breakfasts and lunches, which are all directly tied into the federally subsidized commodity food programs that are designed to control food prices.

These programs first came into existence during the Great Depression of the 1930s and have come under significant criticism by healthy-food advocates and domestic and international farmers alike for its encouragement of the overproduction of less-healthy plants such as corn and soy. Those and other “commodity” crops are either processed into nutritionally deficient food options or carelessly distributed to economically depressed regions of the world where local farmers are unable to compete with the free and subsidized food commodities from the United States (commonly referred to as “import dumping”).

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SR: The people come for a specific service and a specific need. So there is a slightly different feel. We still try to keep it as festive as possible. But it’s changed this year completely. We hardly see the customer anymore! The WIC program takes orders; they let the client fill out a

little order sheet. So we don't know how it's going to feel in the end, but right now, we're not feeling excited about it—we really like the interaction with the customer, with the people.

[sidebar]

Georgia Human Rights Union [this is how it's written on the org's website. OK?]

Unlike many organizations, the Georgia Citizens Coalition on Hunger coordinates its work on a legislative and street-protest level as well as through direct services. And unlike typical charity efforts, the group attempts to connect the act of giving food and relief with providing information and training, so that people can help themselves and organize their communities.

The wing of the organization that bridges this gap most clearly is the Georgia Human Rights Union, which is a hybrid of skill-sharing and political action. The group meets on a quarterly basis and draws mainly from the base of people who come to the Hunger Coalition seeking emergency assistance through the hunger hotline or the food pantry. Everyone is invited to come together and to discuss the deeper issues associated with poverty, from government negligence and policies needing reform to historical inequalities and **unhealthy habits**. They meet to help each other navigate the complexities of the welfare system and learn to cook healthy food from the garden.

Over lovingly prepared meals by Assistant Director Melissa Pittman, the Union is a different approach to a self-help group, with a focus on community and cooperation.

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Could you imagine a policy initiative that would holistically address poverty in the way that you actually talk about in your mission to end poverty?

Chris Edwards (CE), garden volunteer: I think so. I see it as land ownership. If you can provide land to facilitate a way for people to take care of themselves, I think it's possible. If people got empowered by owning land, they might have the ideas: "I am going to grow my food. I don't have to pay for my healthcare anymore, I am my healthcare."

SR: I can envision us getting to a place where we are articulating broad, sweeping policy that could help transform the way we live together—and ensure everyone has a quality of life that is representative of a civilized society. There should not be any hungry or homeless people in America. It should be outlawed. It should be a crime to allow anyone in your city to go without shelter or food, because these [basic necessities] are the measure of a society that has reached a certain level of civility. I don't think there should be people without healthcare in our society, or without education. When we allow people to be ignorant, we all pay the price for it.

Where would you all like to see the Hunger Coalition and its work in five years?

MP: Well, our mission is to end hunger and homelessness in the state of Georgia, and in five years, with some magic, I'd like to see it ended! But realistically, I would hope that we have shared some education and knowledge about how to make this mission come to fruition at some point.

SR: We have another hub in Augusta, and we have an organizer there who is actually working

with her church to try to use the property on the church land to have another garden, and to open up another hunger hotline. We'd love to see [this type of thing] spread to other places around the state.