

Is Charlotte Ready For A Non-Profit Grocery Store?

By AMY ROGERS • 17 HOURS AGO

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Even as a child, Angela Gray knew injustice when she saw it. Grocery stores in her Detroit neighborhood were dirty, smelly – and expensive.

“I’m going to open a free store,” she proclaimed.

“You won’t be in business long,” her mother replied.



Trying food samples.

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It continued to bother the girl that her neighbors had to travel to wealthier parts of town to get good, fresh food. Once she graduated high school, she left Detroit to attend Boston University and then Indiana University. She studied bio-medical engineering and math, and earned an MBA. She embarked on a career in finance and came to Charlotte.

And just like Detroit, there were hungry people without access to healthy food.

What would it take it open a community-based grocery store in an underserved part of Charlotte? Gray asked herself.

It's not as if stores set out to serve their customers inadequately. The average profit margin for a grocery store is between 1% and

3%, a low-profit, high-volume model. Gray explains, “They don’t know how to manage in low-income areas.”

A business coach in the rotational program at Bank of America prodded Gray to talk about her aspirations beyond the workplace. She told him about her idea and began to draft a business plan for a non-profit grocery store. She named it the “[Roots in Community \(RIC's\) Market Foundation](#).”

It's an unfamiliar concept that can cause confusion. When people hear “non-profit,” some picture – incorrectly – a bare-bones store selling surplus, gleaned, or donated food. Gray emphasizes RIC's will look as appealing as a typical grocery store, with products to match. The store will obtain cost subsidies through donations and civic partnerships; these will allow it to stock better quality items and sell them at lower prices. The goal: “To make fresh chicken breasts as affordable as hot dogs.”

Cost isn't the only impediment to buying good food. Shoppers are reluctant to experiment with unfamiliar recipes. “People on a fixed income don't want to spend money on something new that they may not like,” Gray says. So she plans to hold ongoing cooking demos at the store to entice and instruct shoppers how to prepare healthier dishes at home.

That's fine for meal-times, but what about snacking? Some snacks contain more calories, fat, and sodium than an entire meal.

Here's an example of what a non-profit grocery will do: Let's say your family likes [Lay's brand](#) potato chips. They're on special this week at your local store, 2 for \$4. Then you spot [Primizie crispbreads](#) on the shelf and they look interesting. You read the label: They have 30% less fat, 7 grams vs. 10 grams per serving. But the price is roughly double what you'd pay for the chips. You aren't sure your family will like the crispbreads. So you pass them by.

But what if you could sample those healthier snacks and buy the ones you like for the same price as the others? It would be a small but determined step toward better nutrition and health.

Gray is searching for a location in one of Charlotte's westside "food deserts" where residents lack access to a full-service grocery store. She envisions RIC's as not simply a place to buy food, but a community center for offering education, job training, and support of other local businesses. Husband Dennis Gray is a graduate of Johnson & Wales University, and part of the effort as well. (Check out his recipe for a delicious apricot dip [here](#).)

Even if the concept of a nonprofit grocery store is a little complicated, the mission and motto of RIC's are simple: "Healthy food shouldn't be a luxury."

RIC's Market Foundation will be hosting a "Slice 'n' Dice" fundraiser on Saturday, March 4 at [Project 658](#). Teams will compete in a "Chopped"-style cooking challenge, with support from [Earth Fare](#) and [Trader Joe's](#). For more info about events, outreach, and other upcoming programs, visit ricsmarket.org.

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