

R.I.C's Market will be the first of its kind in Charlotte

Putting roots down

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Angela Gray hopes to gradually transition people in west Charlotte to a healthier diet, while providing jobs and further training to local residents at R.I.C's Market.

As a child growing up in 1970s Detroit, Angela Gray remembers being forced to shop with her mother at over-priced, foreign-owned grocery stores that sometimes smelled of rotting meat after all the big chain grocery stores left town.

"There was a food issue in Detroit long before it became a nationwide issue," she says.

It was in the aisles of one these neighborhood grocery stores at the age of 7 that she vividly remembers having a conversation with her mother that became the first step on a path that, nearly 40 years later, has her approaching completion of her lifelong dream in Charlotte.

"I just remember asking my mom why it was that they charged more in places where people didn't have money, but if we drove further out to the stores where it was clean and smelled good, the food was cheaper," Gray says.

"She explained, 'The people here know they have a captive audience and they don't have to do better so they don't.' I told her then that when I grow up, I'm going to open up a free grocery store."

Over the years, Gray has stuck to that plan, although it's adapted over time into a community-based non-profit grocery store, a first-of-its-kind in many ways, especially in Charlotte.

About four years ago, Gray drew up a business plan for R.I.C's Market, a full-size grocery store that would help residents in low-income areas transition to healthier eating habits and which would eventually come under ownership of the community it served.

She has since been working on funding the venture while also doing in-depth research and community engagement events in two west Charlotte food deserts – urban areas without access to healthy, affordable food – that are potential locations for her first store.

Creative Loafing caught up with Gray to chat about what she hopes to accomplish with R.I.C's (Roots In the Community) Market that's never been done before and what obstacles she's faced in that effort.

Creative Loafing: What will R.I.C's Market be exactly, in your own words?

Angela Gray: I think that's the hardest part because nonprofit grocery stores; you hear the term but there isn't a standard. People have a lot of ideas and I've never come across anybody who has understood what I want to do. I think the easiest way to explain it is like a Publix/Harris Teeter – your local grocery store – in a food desert. But what's different than some of the current models is that what I want to do is subsidize the cost of healthy foods. Day one, at a typical store, you'd see what a community would be accustomed to eating, but over time we move people to healthier options. That's one of our measurements of success. You should see your product mix move. You should see less packaged foods and more fresh foods.

How do you plan to do that?

I think there are a lot of ways to solve these problems. Some things we already know; product placement and promotion, samples, cooking demos, pricing and location of the items. All that comes together. We already do it today, we just generally do it with unhealthy stuff. So if we do that and put it at a price point where people can afford it, people will adopt it.

You've been looking at locations in Reid Park and Historic West End and doing community engagement there, what has the feedback been like?

I've been surprised. One of the ladies from the community stood up at one workshop and said, "We've been working for over 30 years to get a full service grocery store, and we have someone here that presented that idea and she cares. She could've went anywhere and she cared enough to come here to present that idea so we need to support her." I was like "Oh my Goodness." I was so happy.

How crucial will the decision regarding location be?

My two biggest challenges right now are location and funds. It's kind of the chicken and the egg. Even if we had the money – if I won that PowerBall and could just open it tomorrow – the location is so important. I'm still researching both (neighborhoods). I know there's a whole set of politics that is very different than corporate America, and it's so important because you don't want to do anything to offend anyone. You want to pull the community together. That's one area that I don't want to misstep in.

How do you plan to pull the community together with R.I.C's once you do locate somewhere?

The way the business model is set up, there are two legal entities: the physical store is an L3C, which is a hybrid between a for-profit and a nonprofit. The way it's operating agreement is set up is that all the profits go from the store to the nonprofit, and then the nonprofit does all the food testing and the job training and scholarships; typical nonprofit stuff.

One of the reasons I went ahead and separated it out is because I really want to give the store back to the community; whether it becomes a co-op or they sell it, do whatever, but it's empowering the community so they're invested in it. A lot of people have said, "Why don't you just open a co-op?" For one, the areas I want to go into are not going to be able to afford to buy into a co-op. Two, they're not going to have the time or the knowledge of how to run a co-op. Part of R.I.C's mission is to get them up to speed so that one day they can do it.

I'm also hoping to partner with some of the local grocery chains to have them volunteer with job-training or to come in and mentor. I think it's a win/win because we're helping to prepare a pool for you of candidates that you can hire but you're also developing a pool that one day can run their own (co-op or store).

What sort of feedback have you gotten from other corporate entities?

The biggest challenge is that it's untested. There's a lot of fear. People love the idea and think it looks great but has it been done someplace else and can you point to an example? There are bits and pieces that have been done successfully across the country but there is no R.I.C's that you can say, "Yeah, this company already did it."

For every other grocery store, it's so hard for them to get out of what they do every day. So they just say, "Oh you can't do that." Over and over I hear that.

I think it's because grocery stores have not done well in low-income areas and it's now become this idea that it's never going to happen. And I agree. As long as you keep doing what you've always been doing, it's never going to happen. You have to do something radically different if you want it to be successful.

How will you raise the money to get where you need to be to open this store?

There is some talk going on that there may be a large donation that comes in to help us get off the ground, so that would be an opportunity. Wells Fargo is working with both those areas and so there may be an opportunity for them to do a large cash infusion. The big banks when I approach them, they say, "You need to have been up and running. You need to make a certain amount. Blah blah," and it goes back to that newness, that fear.

I'm fine with that and that's why I've also said that this may take a little bit longer and we'll have to do more grassroots efforts and make this happen through a lot of small donations. I know the federal government has an \$850,000 grant if you develop in a food desert. That's one of the things UNC Charlotte's Urban Institute has been helping me with: looking at what are some of the options if we go grants versus grassroots.

I think initially we are going to be heavily dependent on grants and fundraising, but I really think there are a lot of opportunities to be self-sufficient in the long term.

Where do you hope to be when I call you at this time next year?

I'm an eternal optimist, so it would be really nice if we did get a big influx of cash and be up and running by this time next year. Although the problem with that is that in the areas we're looking at, we would have to build from the ground up, so if we did build we would probably be in the construction phase at this time next year but that would still be great.

If we go with a standing facility, I would love by this time next year to be up and running. That's the big goal.

In what ways might you have to compromise on your vision to get this project started once and for all?

A question I get asked all the time is, "Does it have to be as big as it is?" All the time, especially talking about money, people say, "It would be much easier if you went with something like a corner store." The problem with that is, if you're going to move people to help you, you need to engage them. If you do a little health food store and that's not what they want, it will be overlooked. By going in big, it allows us to have a bigger impact more immediately.

What I've heard from people who have tried to do it the other way, you can start small and build community support to grow, but it's going to take about 10 to 15 years. I feel so strongly that we can do this big and do it now.