

Meet the Charlotte Women Fighting for Food Justice

Access to fresh produce and nutritious meals is inequitable across Mecklenburg County. These gleaners, teachers, and visionaries are changing that. A new food revolution is coming, and its soldiers are armed with unwanted tomatoes, a portable skillet, and tenacity

By Amy Rogers

Published: 2019.01.22 05:57 AM



Volunteers sort potatoes for the Society of St. Andrew, an organization that collects surplus crops that farmers can't sell and donates them to families in need.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RUSTY WILLIAMS

IF YOU'RE GOING to pick turnips, it's a good idea to bring gloves.

That's a lesson Jean Blish Siers has learned. Turnips grow low to the ground, and on mornings like this one, when it's 26 degrees, it's too cold to grip them with bare hands. Gloves help a picker pull the bulbous vegetable while keeping the long leaves intact—and fingers limber. Siers has repeated the motion thousands of times over the years as she's led crews of volunteers who pick fruits and vegetables on farms across the region.

She and others like her are working to alleviate hunger in their own communities. Rather than developing policies that can take years to implement, Siers and change-makers like her devote their energy toward making a difference now.

That's important, given the statistics about hunger in our region. In North Carolina, one in five children live in poverty, which diminishes everything from health to academic achievement and social mobility. In Mecklenburg County, the number of food-insecure households, or homes without regular access to healthy food, is higher than the state and national averages. Better access to fresh, nutritious food can improve these conditions.

Siers is the Charlotte regional coordinator for the [Society of St. Andrew](#), an organization that feeds hungry people by collecting surplus crops that farmers can't sell in a practice known as gleaning. It's a centuries-old practice, seen in the Old Testament, and has become a growing movement as communities seek creative solutions to hunger. The local program operates year-round. Over the winter, Siers handles more administrative tasks, giving talks to civic groups, schools, and churches about hunger and food waste—unless she gets word there's a field to be gleaned.

Jim and Mary Little of Riverbend Farm in Cabarrus County plant a section of their farm every year just for the Society of St. Andrew. When the turnips and other greens are ready to be picked in November and December, Siers and her volunteers scatter across the Littles' frosty fields to pick as much as they can.





RUSTY WILLIAMS

Volunteers gather in the parking lot of New Friendship Presbyterian Church in Huntersville to bag and sort potatoes (top). Jean Blish Siers (above) is the Charlotte regional

coordinator for the Society of St. Andrew and helps distribute fresh produce to those in need.

“I always loved to feed people,” says Siers, who grew up on a farm in her native Minnesota. Eight years ago, she signed up to volunteer with the organization. When a paying position opened up, she applied and got the job in 2012.

“We find farmers, and farmers find us,” she explains. Volunteer gleaners across the 17-county region Siers serves will often pull up to a farmer’s market, buy produce, then ask if the proprietor has heard about the gleaning program. (Farmers can claim federal tax credits for donations.)

Siers dispatches the volunteers to the fields as the calls come in, sometimes three times a week during the summer when tomatoes, corn, and squash are in season. There’s nothing wrong with the food. Sometimes it’s just the wrong size or inconsistent in color. Customers demand uniformity, so grocers reject crops that are too small or not pretty enough. “It would surprise people to know how much food goes to waste,” she says. “Farmers have to work through market limitations. We’ve gotten so distant from our food that we don’t realize when we go to the store that food doesn’t always look like that.”

Food straight from a farm, for one thing, is dirty. Potatoes in the field look like rocks nestled in the soil, and top-heavy stalks of tomatoes bend with the weight, littering the ground with overripe vegetables bursting open. Sizes vary wildly, unlike what big-box grocery shoppers usually see; a turnip can be as small as a walnut or as big as a softball.

Corn is easy to pick because it’s tall and bulky. “You just snap and put it in a bucket,” Siers says. Strawberries can be frustrating because pickers have to get down on their hands and knees, then make sure not to bruise the tender fruit. It takes a lot to fill a bucket. But the crews remain energetic and focused, moving steadily through each patch they work. “If you put a couple dozen people in a field,” she says, “they can pick three or four thousand pounds of tomatoes.”

It all adds up. The Society reports that from January to November 2018, 208 providers donated food that supported 605 feeding programs in the Carolinas. More than 10,000 volunteers gleaned over 4.6 million pounds of fresh food in the two states. Trucks loaded with thousands of pounds of produce head to agencies such as Loaves & Fishes or more

directly to those in need—to food pantries, to senior housing communities, and to low-income neighborhoods. During the whole process, no money is allowed to change hands.



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Alisha Pruett picks up unsold food from Trader Joe's (above) and then sets up pop-up markets to distribute the food.

IT'S NOT EASY to catch up with Alisha Pruett.

She spends most mornings doing farm work. Then, several times a week, she and a rotating roster of volunteers through her organization, [The Bulb](#), drive routes between grocery stores, including Trader Joe's and Earth Fare, and farms, where the drivers “rescue” unsold food. They distribute the unwanted goods through a system of pop-up markets across the region. Some days, it's at the Charlotte Transportation Center in uptown. Other days, they set up in neighborhoods where residents can't easily get fresh food, such as the Little Rock Apartments, a low-income housing complex near the airport.

If access isn't a hurdle for fresh produce, affordability is. People gather at the truck as the crew unloads folding tables and piles them high with bagged salads, cartons of eggs, boxes of apples, and baskets of potatoes. Shoppers can fill their bags with as much as

they want to take. “Do you need greens?” a volunteer asks. “How about carrots?” Kids laugh at the misshapen local carrots until Pruett challenges them to a taste test; they discover the lumpy ones are sweeter than the prettier ones that came out of a plastic bag. Brenda Grant, who lives at the complex, collects names and phone numbers of the people who attend so the organization can see if food recipients are seeing an improvement in their household budget and their overall health and wellness. “This is a godsend,” says resident Natasha Morris.



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Her market on Edison Street in Druid Hills.

At the same time, Pruett is taking photos and posting them on social media to let people know where to come for fresh fruits and vegetables. “We can serve 200 people per market per day,” she explains. Pruett maintains an Excel spreadsheet of venues, schedules, and requests.

The endeavor began when Pruett was a social worker helping homeless veterans find housing. She noticed many of them lived miles from a grocery store and sometimes just as far from a bus line. She started bringing her clients boxes from farmers’ markets until, in 2013, she founded her organization. The Bulb also purchases and distributes kitchen staples—such as eggs and milk—along with fresh produce.

The Bulb runs on what she calls a “no barrier model.” Pruett says, “There are no lines and no waiting lists.” There’s no registration required to receive food. And people pay what they can afford, even if that means nothing.

AUGUSTA WASHINGTON loads her Chrysler 200 with an electric skillet, cutting boards and knives, measuring cups, and bowls.

She packs pantry staples, stops to buy meat and vegetables for her recipes, then travels to housing complexes, shelters, and halfway houses. That’s where she teaches people how to cook fresh food in ways that help stretch a limited budget.

Most people will never see Washington or the work she does as Mecklenburg County’s designated nutrition program educator for [N.C. State University](#). Her activities are part of the [Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program](#) (EFNEP), a federally funded program that works to improve food security through nutrition education. She recites the organization’s mission: “We focus on limited resource families, with an emphasis on parents or any caregiver for children in the home or who are responsible for children under 19.”





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Augusta Washington (top) is a nutrition program educator and travels throughout Mecklenburg County teaching people to cook on a budget. She leaves students with a skill-builder kit (above).

Washington maintains a stock of non-perishables, and she shops before each presentation for fresh ingredients. Much of what she teaches in her presentations is unfamiliar to her students, so she tries to prepare them. “Try to keep an open mind and work with me,” she’ll tell them. “Some things will go against what your mom and grandmom told you.”

A recent class prepared tuna burgers. In another, Washington showed students how to make their own reduced-sodium soy sauce and a meatless stir-fry dish. “We cover quite a bit. We show them how to stretch their dollars, compare prices, plan meals, cut down on food waste,” she says. “The recipes all cost between five and seven dollars to fix for a family of four. These are recipes they can duplicate.”

Washington is new to Charlotte, having relocated from Nevada in September 2017. She’s a seasoned teacher who holds a degree in food science and spent eight years prior to her move refining the model in a similar position with EFNEP. Her dedication is both professional and personal. “I have a passion for reaching those families; I come from a low-in-

come family,” she says. “If students graduate from my class, they can use me as a reference for a job. It gives them a sense of success.”

When students complete the series of classes, Washington says, “They always get a skill-builder kit. Some (students) are more challenging; you have to give them things to keep them coming back.” So she’ll dole out a cutting board, kitchen thermometer, cookbook, measuring cups, spoons, and a certificate of completion during each lesson.

“I’m not here to change everything about you,” she’ll tell a class. “If you can make one small change and be consistent, at the end of the year that will make a big difference.”

ANGELA GRAY GREW UP in Detroit, where her family shopped in neighborhood stores that were poorly stocked, dirty, and expensive.

She realized for the first time that small stores in poor areas usually lack selection, and grocers struggle to make even a modest profit.

Years later, after she earned an MBA and established a banking career here, it continued to bother her that even in this economically thriving city, she still saw so many people trapped in poverty—Charlotte ranks 50th among the country’s 50 largest cities in economic mobility—and without access to quality food.

So she created a business plan for a nonprofit grocery store, one where donations from businesses and individuals would subsidize and reduce costs for low-income customers. She named it [Roots In the Community \(R.I.C.’s\) Market Foundation](#). Once built, it would be a radical approach to making healthy food both accessible and affordable.

“There are a lot of ways to engage people,” Gray says, “but if they still can’t afford it, then you defeat the point.”



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One day, Angela Gray hopes to open a non-traditional, nonprofit grocery store. This vacant building on West Trade Street near Johnson C. Smith University used to be an A&P grocery store.

As with most businesses, she says, “the two biggest challenges are location and financing.” Efforts to find a location on the West Side, often called a “food desert” for its lack of grocery stores, didn’t pan out. Now Gray and her group are hopeful about the vacant Harveys Supermarket on The Plaza, though it’s in a less fragile neighborhood. To answer critics, she says, “We’re trying to think of creative ways to take location out of the mix.” That could mean deliveries or ride-sharing for customers once the store opens, she hopes, in late 2019.

She’s encouraged about funds that may become available through the federal Farm Bill, and she’s also preparing a presentation for the North Carolina Healthy Food Retail Task Force. “A lot of little things are starting to come together, so I’m much more optimistic,” Gray says.

Its founder emphasizes that R.I.C.’s Market will be a fully functioning retail store, not a food bank or pantry. “Poor people shop where rich people shop,” she explains, “but rich people won’t shop where poor people shop.” She’ll reach out to more affluent customers

to buy memberships, and these will also help fund the price reductions their neighbors need. Gray says, “People feel more empowered and things are more valuable when they pay for something. People don’t want a handout; they want to be able to provide for their families, and this gives them that opportunity.”

Gray holds a full-time corporate job at NTT Data but remains committed to her goal of a nonprofit grocery store—and the promise it holds—while recognizing the challenges. A similar model was opened in New Orleans, called Sterling Farms, but closed one year later. Still, Gray is staunch. “Social issues will never be solved if you don’t see the people you’re working with as yourself—if you’re not as passionate or working as hard for them as for yourself and your children,” she says.

“But when you interact with other people and you see that there’s hope, it prepares the next generation to do great things.”

Gray foresees partnering with other advocacy groups to enhance the overall mission of bringing better food to underserved people. Thinking of her colleague Alisha Pruett and The Bulb’s challenges to find refrigeration for rescued perishables, Gray says, “If we partner with other nonprofits, we can help each other meet our missions.”

And that’s the thing about these dynamic projects and the women moving them forward. There’s room for everyone at the table—and plenty of misshapen, and delicious, carrots for everyone who has a need.

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