Issue Area

• Improving consumer access to healthy food.

• Strengthening the economic and cultural vitality of a community

Strategy

• Community Organizing

• Local and state policy initiatives

My “Fresh Idea” for a better food system is “rooted” in circumstances that are not so fresh at all.

The backdrop to the idea is another inner-city community that has been systematically disfranchised and left largely to fend for itself, the result being a type of community blight―what I call human “blossom end rot” ( botanical term)―a slow decay of human potential due to a lack of physical, mental and emotional “nourishment.” Symptoms of the aforementioned “dis-ease” are depravity, depression, despair and generational poverty cycles that are seemingly impossible to break.

These symptoms are exacerbated in no small way by the lack of access to adequate fresh and whole foods, and by the lack of knowledge as to why and how to prepare these foods in a culturally relevant, life-giving and life-sustaining way when they are accessible.

The particular community that I live, work and vision in―the West End Community of Birmingham, Alabama―has some of the most alarming health statistics in the nation.

Obesity #

Diabetes #

Heart Disease #

Incidentally it is also ranked # for fast food restaurants in the nation.

Although this particular community ranks in the top 10 for health disparities across all major life-threatening diseases, it is representative of the general state of low-income communities of color across the nation.

The aforementioned health disparities are largely (though not exclusively) the result of food practices that diminish life energy and… life. These practices (diets high in the consumption of processed, denatured and fatty foods, and low in the consumption of whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables) are encouraged by our present day fast lane/fast food culture and enforced by circumstances in which the   
“healthy choice” is not the easy choice because all too often that choice is not readily available.

Though the symptoms are complex the (dietary) solutions are simple. Food is fundamental: fundamental to good health, *which is* fundamental to strong bodies, *which are* fundamental to strong minds. Strong minds create strong communities. Strong communities are the foundation of a healthy society, and a healthy society would naturally expect and support a healthy food system.

I believe the way to a community's heart is through its stomach. Once a community's heart is open, the stage is set to share information, resources and “Fresh Ideas.” It is my vision to revitalize a community's lifeblood, body, mind and spirit through the collective process of growing good food, and by creating educational and economically sustainable food institutions that function in service of the health and well being of its residents.

My “Fresh Idea” is rooted in reworking the old adage of “teaching a man to fish”: it is about teaching a community how to grow, and the notion that by changing a community's food practices one person at a time, one bite at a time, you can change a “system” community by community.

The foundations of such a vision are **Inspiration**, **Education** and **Institutions**.

**Inspiration** through the fundamental example of “Community Gardens” that are **Beautiful** and **Bountiful**. Beauty is inspiring, and beautiful spaces interwoven into the fabric of community give residents a place and a space to be. The gardens would serve as multipurpose resources: creating green space, food access, a safe place for seniors and young children to move; they would provide specialized training for young people in horticulture and green jobs relevant to agriculture.

**Education** through the implementation of community-based classes, programs and events around healthy foods appropriate to the community's culture. The objective of these classes, programs and events would be to facilitate dialogue about food and food choices and to experience culturally relevant foods prepared in a whole and healthy way.

**Institutions** through the creation of **holistic** models of food institutions that not only employ and profit community members financially but provide social culture for mental and emotional health. The net worth of these business institutions is ultimately determined by their contribution to the health and well being of the community in which they serve.

This is an evolutionary foundational structure that can be replicated in other inner city neighborhoods, reclaiming abandoned or neglected land and employing local youth at a fair living wage. This workforce can be trained to run sustainable food enterprises that help the community, and because it is *their* community they will naturally have a vested interest in the enterprise's stability, “growth” and success.

Local and state policy changes and new initiatives are crucial components to enterprises based on the acquisition and use of land for agriculture and agricultural businesses in urban settings. A part of the process of initiating policy changes for land use (vacant lots and city properties) and for usage of city services (water and public works departments) is to “cultivate” understanding, relationships and partnerships among citizens, policymakers and politicians to encourage working in a mutually beneficial and nonantagonistic manner to support food enterprises that make a community a worthwhile place to live and a city worthy of mention. Ultimately this can alleviate some of the societal dysfunction and improve health conditions that burden not only communities but local and state governments.

Is this a simplistic view? “Change the Food System, Change the World”? Absolutely!

If a community's mind is changed about food, a community changes the way it eats; if communities change the way they eat, a system is changed.

There is an African proverb that questions: How do you eat an elephant? Answer: One bite at a time.

My proverbial “Fresh Idea” is that communities are just bites of the elephant. Communities make up cities, cities make up states, states make nations and our national **Food** **System**, though broken, can be ***Restored***, ***Renewed and*** ***Transformed***, one ‘bite’ at a time.