

Creating Food Security, Improving Health, Creating Community

Food security is about more than food; it's about social justice and equity. Good food is a human right, and to ensure everyone has access to good food requires healthy food systems. Many individuals and organizations are working toward re-establishing this core value as a foundation for society, a society that is sustainable and high functioning.

Urban Food Security

Surprisingly many urban areas in the nation are food deserts—places limited to convenience stores, fast food and liquor stores that are devoid of grocery stores with healthy food choices. Many times people living in food deserts are food insecure—they do not have access to healthy food or possibly even regular meals.

True food security means all citizens have continuous access to healthy, affordable, sustainably grown and culturally appropriate food and products. To establish these systems, we need to close the loop and create integrated systems. Such systems consider land use and ownership, transportation, health, lowering carbon dependency, creating businesses that are locally owned and operated, education, waste stream management and renewable energy production. These pieces link together to form the apparatuses that create the community food system.

⋮ Erika Allen
⋮ Growing Power



Creating Urban Food Oases

We cannot have healthy communities without a healthy food system. Everybody, regardless of economic means, should have access to healthy, affordable food. Industrial farming with cross-country supply chains is not a secure food distribution system and doesn't supply the healthiest food. It doesn't create local jobs or support the local economy. Food should be grown where people are. Locally produced food eliminates much of the distribution and transportation costs, providing a bigger return for farmers. In fact, most corporate farmers only receive 20 cents of every food dollar.¹

In 1993, my father, Will Allen, designed a program that offered teens an opportunity to work at his store and renovate the greenhouse to grow food for their communities. This simple partnership to change the landscape of the north side of Milwaukee blossomed into a national and global commitment to sustainable food systems. With three farms, five satellite educational centers, the Farm-to-City Market Basket Program and farmer's cooperative, Growing Power is now a national touchstone for the community food movement and reaches tens of thousands of community food activists across the country.

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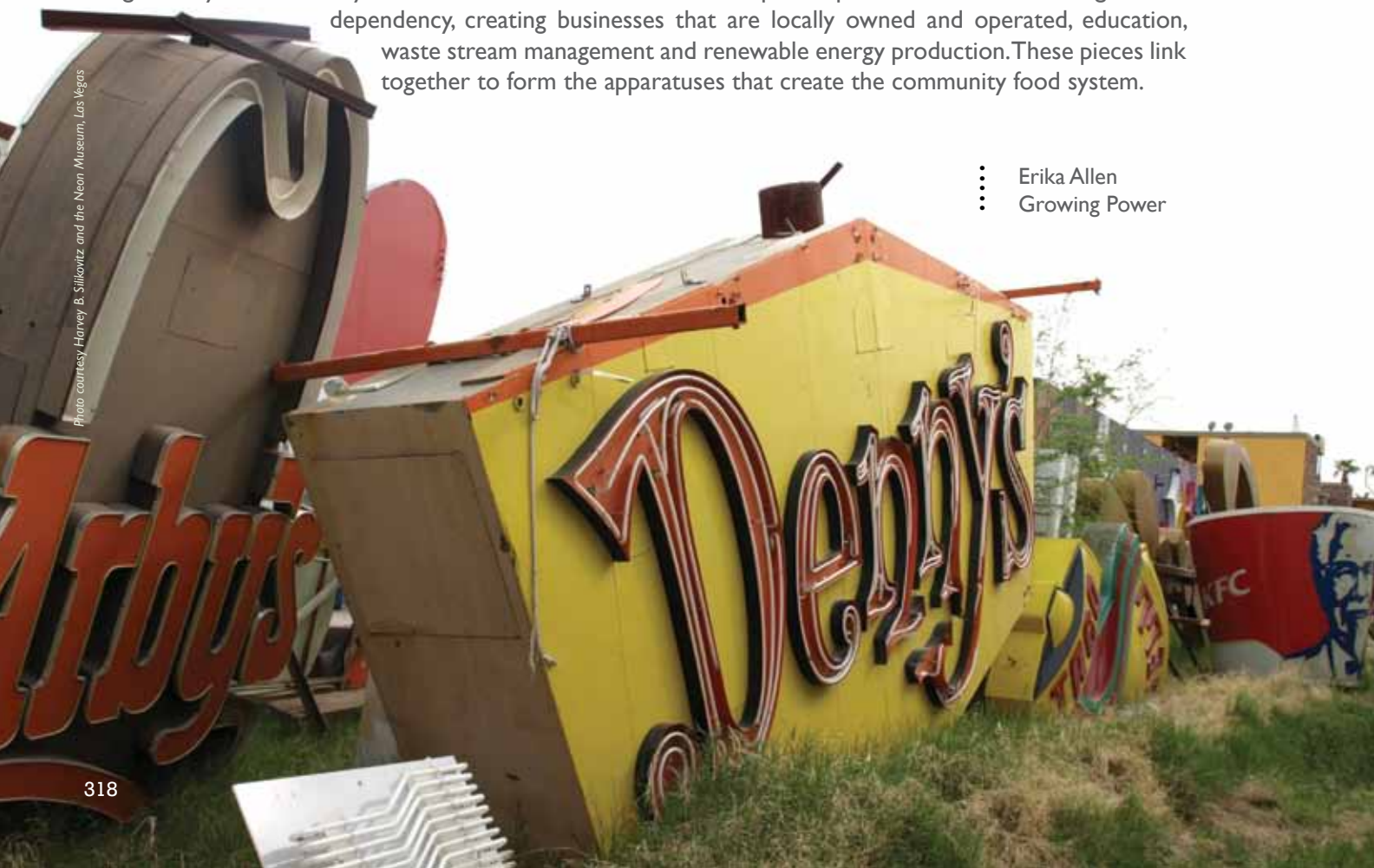
Food Security:

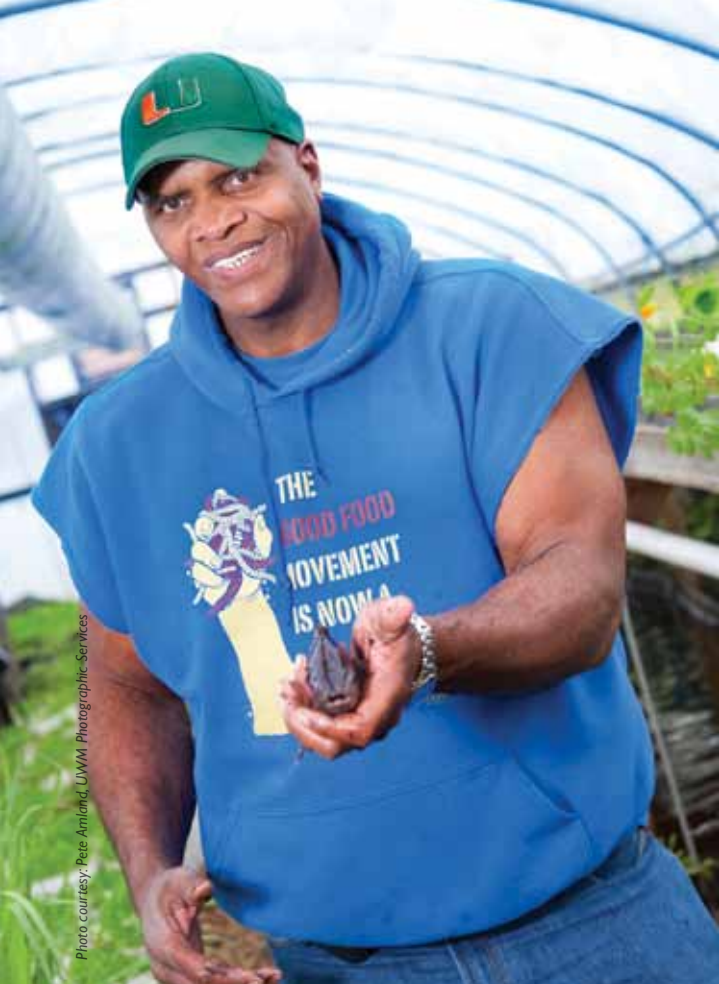
The ability to grow, process and consume food locally

To control and operate the food production and distribution systems

The ability to sustain and feed one's population in times of distress (disaster, terrorism, war)

Have access to food that supports the cultural and spiritual traditions of the people





Above: Will Allen, founder of Growing Power.
Below: One of the Growing Power greenhouses in Milwaukee, WI.

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Jerry Kaufman, a professor at University of Wisconsin-Madison and sometimes called the “father of urban farming,” was one of the first to propose using abandoned industrial land back for urban agriculture.² Now the urban farm movement is gaining momentum and making lasting change in low-income and food-insecure neighborhoods.

Signs of Progress

Chicago Lights Urban Farm is an urban farm and community garden. This garden, initially a community garden model, has made a transition to an urban farm. A community garden provides space for folks to grow what they like in designated allotment spaces, build relationships and add beauty to the concrete landscape. The urban farm onsite is concerned with production, high-value crops and the ability to provide employment and produce to sell. This transition was enabled by the Youth Corp members from public housing adjacent to the farm seeking living-wage employment in the green jobs sector via urban agriculture. The site will eventually house three greenhouses, a farm-stand and office/classroom space for the community.

The goals of the **Iron Street Urban Farm and Organic Waste Processing Facility**, in Chicago's Bridgeport neighborhood, are two-fold: “growing” healthy soil (via compost) delivered from reputable waste haulers from green restaurants and businesses

with sustainability plans and using closed-loop ecological practices to produce local, healthy and sustainable food year-round. The project uses growing and distribution methods that create a carbon neutral footprint with tangible public health benefits for all with a focus on serving the needs of vulnerable populations. The seven-acre site will include 20 hoop houses to grow fresh produce year-round; aquaponics systems, producing healthy mercury-free tilapia; vermicomposting; livestock (chickens, ducks and rabbits); urban apiary; urban orchard and vine fruit production; green roof production and research; and the training and employment of at-risk youth.

Our School at Blair Grocery in New Orleans' Ninth Ward is a resource-rich safe space for youth empowerment and sustainable community development. Founder and former school teacher Nat Turner said, “We must have safe spaces for youth to take risks to transform themselves.” The project works to increase students' overall literacy by building skills, abilities and confidence, including their sense of efficacy. It teaches them how access resources that build stronger communities and that they are valued participants in community building efforts.

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Operating out of a former grocery store and two empty lots, both flooded by Katrina, Our School is a unique combination of urban farm and youth education. The student-led urban farm produces \$2,500 worth of vegetables weekly, and students sell it to popular New Orleans restaurants and at the onsite farmers' market.³ An after-school activity center, a home-building and construction program and educational classes on topics such as food justice, New Orleans history, urban communities and public health are also offered at Our School.

“We must bring youth to the table with a developed and articulate vision of their own creation to act as agents of social change,” said Turner. “We must understand that anyone who is not speaking to the youth in our community is not truly speaking to our community.”

Our School at Blair Grocery New Orleans' 9th Ward

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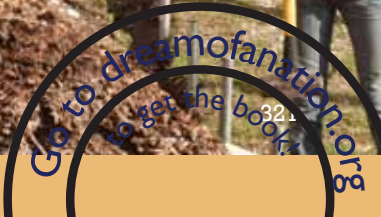


Photo courtesy: Pete Amlund, UWM Photographic Services

Photo courtesy: Justin Leonard

Photos courtesy: Our School at Blair Grocery



Photo courtesy: Growing Power

Q&A with Will Allen

change our mindset to cost per square foot! We want to generate \$5 per square foot, on an acre of intensively farmed land that will gross a farmer more than \$200,000 per year.

Q: So it's kind of counter-intuitive but scaling up does not mean farming more acres like big agriculture, but maximizing small spaces? Yes, and scaling up also means creating more jobs, by using small spaces. How do you engage, re-engage communities, who want to be part of it? The key is growing high-nutrient soil, not using chemicals, using natural inputs, closing the loop with our current waste streams. It also means developing relationships with your consumers and CSAs (community supported agriculture) are a good example. Asking the consumer to pay upfront for a share of the farms produce over the season, sharing the risk with the farmer. So when there is a bumper crop, you get more tomatoes than you know what to do with, and when there is a drought, you take the hit with the farmer. This makes the system truly community based.

Q: Hope for the future? I think one of my hopes for this movement/revolution is that it keeps gaining momentum, that we get thousands of people involved and create a new industry that grows jobs. That is my big thing right now, how do we create more jobs, new strategies? One way is if the regional training centers are able to replicate our work in a culturally appropriate way, we will be able to impact the food system nationally and globally.

Also I would like to see agriculture training back in the schools, re-enchanting our youth and their connection to farming and the earth. I would also like to get more top-down operators involved in supporting community agriculture; this is important too, from all areas and many players need to be involved. The revolution will require hundreds of different job categories to be successful.

Q: What is the Good Food Movement (GFM)? A movement is something that moves along a continuum. The good food movement is about promoting healthy food to people in all communities. The same type of food that would go to upscale communities, we find ways to get to everyone. That happens along a long continuum that gathers momentum as it moves forward, until it becomes a revolution. That is where we are. The movement started with a few hundred people in the '60s, thousands in the '70s and '80s, continually increasing through the turn of century to where there are now with millions of people involved.

Q: What is the barrier for GFM becoming reality? I would not call them barriers, and I would call them challenges. First is a lack of healthy soil. We also need to address some of the restrictive policies in place that make getting healthy food to people difficult, particularly in urban and remote rural areas. We have to grow more farmers and producers but educating them takes a long time. Long-term access to land can also be a challenge.

Q: How do we scale up? For both local and global communities, we need to provide training and resources to grow intensively inside of cities. Because of the high cost of this valuable land and oil, we must maximize space. We have to rethink how we grow—rather than cost per square acre we need to

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Scaling Up

Expanding the local and sustainable food systems requires farmers, farmers, farmers. Urban agriculture has the potential to generate living wages for farmers who have been trained and know how to grow intensively and market their products.

For sustainable food systems and urban farming to scale up on a national level, not only do we need more farmers; they also need to earn a living wage. Farmers need the support of the community—individuals, business and local government, who see the value in sourcing food locally. Revising city and county zoning policies to legalize commercial urban farms would be the initial step. Local and regional governments could show their support for local farmers by instituting policies that prioritize locally grown products. Consumer education is also important. Consumers will be more likely to seek out locally grown food when they understand the value of supporting the local economy and as well as the likely increase in nutritional value.

Shining examples of success are sprouting up around the country, and it is clear that converting urban areas from food deserts to oases of abundance builds community, creates jobs, improves health and reduces our carbon footprint.

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Photo courtesy: Linda N.

An urban garden, featuring rows of tomatoes and kale, in Chicago, IL.

Erika Allen is projects manager for Growing Power (www.growingpower.org) and is headquartered in Chicago, IL. As the daughter of Will Allen, she has a small-farm agricultural background and experience. She spent her formative years involved in all aspects of farm management, from transplanting seedlings to managing farm stands and farmers' markets. Allen received a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and recently received an MA in art therapy from the University of Illinois at Chicago. Growing Power is a national non-profit organization and land trust supporting people from diverse backgrounds, and the environments in which they live, by helping to provide equal access to healthy, high-quality, safe and affordable food for people in all communities.



Photo courtesy: mjmomty

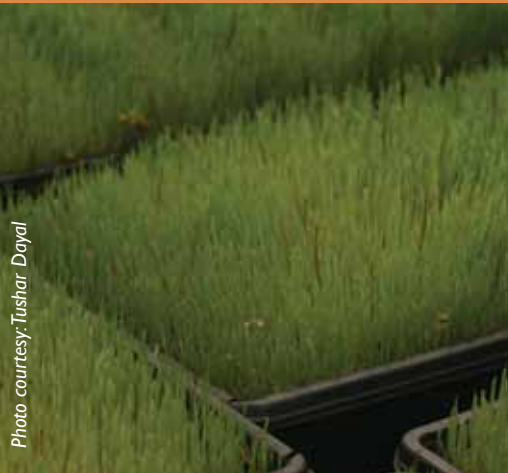


Photo courtesy: Tushar Doyal



Photo courtesy: Charlie Vinz

