

A CLOSER LOOK

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A Closer Look takes topics from previous and current issues of *Bridges* and examines them from a local perspective.

...AT THE LOUISVILLE REGION

Fresh Approach Brings New Type of Farmers Market to the City

For residents of certain communities in Louisville, it is easier to buy a burger than broccoli. Like other underserved communities across the nation, the food retail sector in west Louisville and east downtown does not meet local demand, leaving residents with few good options to grocery shop in their own neighborhoods.

In addition, a high percentage of residents in these two areas do not have vehicles. They are marooned in an urban food “desert,” with limited access to nutritious foods. Often, residents tend to purchase readily available, but less healthy, fast food. As a result, they have a lower standard of living than residents in other parts of Louisville and have an increased risk of illness from health-related food problems, according to a community food assessment released last year by Community Farm Alliance (CFA). But that is, community leaders hope, changing.

Social Entrepreneurship

Urban Fresh, an innovative reinvention of the traditional farmers market, has “emerged as an oasis of community hope, education and access

to fresh locally grown food in the heart of the urban food desert,” as described by Bill Huston, Urban Fresh business development coordinator.

Sayeded Asante, founder of Urban Fresh, had a dream of improving the quality of life

in Louisville, he discovered that the lack of access to nutritious food in west Louisville and east downtown was a major social ill.

Collecting the Data

Bridging the Divide: Growing



Sayeded Asante, left, chats with customers at California Farmers Market in west Louisville. Asante is the founder of Urban Fresh, a social entrepreneurship venture dedicated to making fresh produce available to inner-city residents.

for the residents in his community. He co-founded Urban Fresh with a group of young people interested in changing their lives through social entrepreneurship. Asante said through his involvement with CFA and the Muhammad Ali Institute of Peace and Justice at the University of

Louisville, he discovered that the lack of access to nutritious food in west Louisville and east downtown was a major social ill. *Self-Sufficiency in Our Food Supply*, the community food assessment conducted by CFA in 2007, confirmed a lack of access to fresh and healthy foods in those neighborhoods. It also confirmed that there were 24 fast-food restaurants on Broadway alone (which runs through

both communities), the highest concentration of fast-food restaurants anywhere in Kentucky. The assessment showed that in the most affected areas, 70 percent of residents do not have access to vehicles, compared with as low as 5 percent in the least affected areas of the county. These communities also have the highest rates of diet-related illnesses, such as heart disease and diabetes, in Louisville.

According to data provided by Urban Fresh, west Louisville is home to 80,000 people, including 27,000 children, 38 percent of whom are living below the poverty line. In Jefferson County, where Louisville is located, there is an average of one grocery store per 6,100 people. In west Louisville, that average is one store per 20,000 people. West Louisville residents cite poor product variety, low quality and high prices. CFA's community food assessment found that low-income residents pay 10 percent to 40 percent more in convenience stores for “hard” produce with a long shelf life (potatoes, carrots, onions).

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While there are many convenience stores in these neighborhoods, the community assessment reported that only one-fourth of them sold all five basic food groups, none sold leafy vegetables and few sold fresh fruit.

In collaboration with Asante, CFA and the Muhammad Ali Institute developed the concept of Urban Fresh as an urban food delivery business. Asante and his business partners—Victor Barnes, Larry Holden and Bill Huston—developed a plan to ensure access to fresh locally grown produce and meats for the residents of west Louisville and east downtown. All four partners credit CFA staff Joe Schroeder and Karyn Moskowitz with providing technical assistance and expertise to help the business succeed.

The First Season

In the spring of 2007, the business partners spent several weeks canvassing the Victory Park area of the California neighborhood, one of several neighborhoods that make up west Louisville, to see if residents would support a farmers market in their own community. Based on that market assessment, Urban Fresh opened the California Farmers Market at Victory Park in June 2007. By the end of the season, the California Farmers Market routinely sold out of locally fresh foods and vegetables.

Although the food prices charged were below market price and included a 20 percent to 25 percent markup, the business still managed to turn a profit in its first year. Each market day showcased new entertainment, and a local chef visited to share recipes and cooking tips. The

response was overwhelmingly positive and restored a community-building spirit and festive atmosphere to a park that had deteriorated due to gang activity, Barnes said.

Connecting with Farmers

Urban Fresh purchases its fresh fruit and vegetables from another CFA-incubated business, Grasshoppers Distribution LLC, the only farmer-owned distribution company in Kentucky. The relationship with Grasshoppers allowed Urban Fresh to accept WIC and Senior WIC vouchers from the government, in addition to grant money from CFA, which provided a line of credit. Urban Fresh also saves on fuel costs because Grasshoppers has consolidated the distribution of produce in west Louisville, where it has a warehouse. It is the drop-off point for farmers, who can sell their products at a fair market price without the cost of marketing and with reduced transportation costs.

Ivor Chodkowski, co-owner of Grasshoppers and past president of CFA, said the idea behind the business was to alleviate nonfarm business for farmers. The three main market segments of Grasshoppers include stores and restaurants, community-supported agriculture and institutional accounts. Grasshoppers is co-owned by four partners: Chodkowski, Susan Schlosnagler, Tim Mraceks and John Sharpe.

Grasshoppers sells catfish, meat, poultry and eggs year-round. Produce is sold during the growing season. Since the produce and meats are locally grown, consumers benefit from higher nutrient value and fresher food because it is sold immediately after harvest. Most of the small farms grow organic

food and the animals are free-range, grass-fed, hormone-free and steroid-free.

The Spin-Off

Urban Fresh has done much more than bring fresh food to a distressed urban area.

The company opened a second farmers market in October 2007 on the downtown college campus of Spalding University for students, faculty and residents of nearby neighborhoods. The campus is located only blocks from east downtown.

Spalding University's dean of student affairs, Richard Hudson, said the university's relationship with Urban Fresh helps students think critically about issues related to the environment, social justice, access and cost of foods. Professors in disciplines such as social work and philosophy have even started to incorporate Urban Fresh's presence on campus into their curriculum.

"Access to healthy nutritious food is a very tangible issue that relates to what we are trying to teach students because everyone eats," Hudson said. "I can't imagine any university not jumping on board because you are benefiting the mind, body and soul."

Last year, Big Momma's Soul Food Restaurant became the first and most loyal commercial account of Urban Fresh. Owner Jessie Greene bought her vegetables during the growing season from Urban Fresh. The business partners of Urban Fresh initially patronized the restaurant and

eventually approached Greene about purchasing her vegetables from them. She found that the cost of buying from Urban Fresh was lower than her wholesale distributor and included delivery.

Asante and the other partners also want to help the youth of these communities realize they can earn money through entrepreneurship that actually benefits their community. The partners have built relationships with programs such as YouthBuild and Youth Opportunities Unlimited to give young people a chance to learn about entrepreneurship, community activism and financial education. "Instead of just employing youth, we are trying to train them to be entrepreneurs and to understand money," Huston said. He is the business development coordinator for Urban Fresh. Barnes, who worked on Chodkowski's farm for a year to learn how to tend to and harvest crops, hopes to inspire youth to become entrepreneurs as well as introduce them to agriculture.

Urban Fresh also is networking with neighborhood associations in West Louisville to conduct mobile markets to service customers who cannot get to the market. They are also holding seminars on nutrition and the importance of eating healthy foods. Jewish Hospital, in downtown Louisville, will host a new Urban Fresh farmers market this summer for its employees.



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