Food Fighter

Former high school teacher David Roach is bringing black farmers and healthy produce back to urban neighborhoods.

June 1, 2007 As told to Kellee Terrell

My father was a part-time sharecropper, so when I was growing up in rural Texas my family always ate fresh fruits and vegetables. But in low-income or predominately black neighborhoods like West Oakland, California, where I now live, that is not always the case. Grocery store chains will not invest here, claiming high theft and insurance rates. If they do, the stores are not equal to their sister stores in more affluent areas. In some areas, people are forced to shop at corner liquor stores because there is no grocery store nearby.

I started Mo' Better Food in 1998 as a reaction to three factors: the decline of black farmers; West Oakland residents' lack of access to fresh produce; and their alarming diet-related health issues. In California, black farmers make up less than 1 percent of all farmers—and because of discrimination, they have lost both land and money. At the same time, I noticed high rates of obesity, heart disease and all types of cancer in our community, due to poor diet.

I held a conference with church leaders and residents to come up with some solutions. We agreed that black farmers needed a place to sell their produce, and black communities needed fresh food, so having a market is a great way of partnering the two. Our farmer's market is a place where everyone can come together, shop and enjoy the community.

By having cooking demonstrations, passing out recipes and working with catering companies, we hope to change some eating habits and misconceptions while preserving some of our culture. A lot of people will tell me, "Hey man, I will eat greens at my grandma's house, but I don't know how to cook them at home."

Our philosophy is "Healthy Economics." In addition to a market, we want to purchase land to grow crops, develop our own grocery stores and create jobs for residents. We want West Oakland to be a place where you can both work and live.

To start a farmer's market in your community, first try contacting organizations like the National Black Farmers Association (www.blackfarmers.org). Or advertise in your community newspaper that you are looking for farmers. Local schools make good locations. Use senior shuttles for transportation so more people can attend. Most important, get everyone in the community

involved to shop and work at the market.

* *Visit Mo’ Better Food online at www.mobetterfood.com. For more information about starting a market, read* The New Farmers’ Market: Farm-Fresh Ideas for Producers, Managers & Communities *(New World Publishing, $24.95).*

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