

Session 5, Quick Shop on Women Urban Farmers

Margaret Connors (MC), City Growers, Moderator

Kafi Dixon (KD), Social Entrepreneur, former owner of Milk & Honey Produce Market, Graduate of Master Urban Gardeners Program and New Entry Sustainable Farming Project

Nataka Crayton-Walker (NCW), urban farmer, Village Farm, City Growers, co-creator and consultant with Urban Farming Institute

Jolie Olivetti (JO), formerly with Victory Programs' ReVision Urban Farm in Dorchester, MA

Shani Fletcher (SF), Farm Manager at Victory Programs' ReVision Urban Farm

MC (moderator): Welcome. The newest data is that 14% of US farms are women operated; 90% of those are small farms. Not surprising, right? Minority and women operated farms are growing, even though 90% of farms are operated by whites, with an average age of 58 years old. There's plenty of opportunity for anybody to farm land. We also have to reform the way we grow food, but that's for another panel. I wonder if you could put your hands up, all the women and men who are farming right now. That's probably about 15. (Applause) Now I'll let all the panelists introduce themselves and what got them into farming, or whatever they want to say.

NCW: I am a farmer and also a private chef. I probably started when I was little, I always had a dream of being a farmer, which was attributed to being exposed to open spaces: going camping, drinking goats milk, cooking West African food and eating with my fingers. I was homeless as a teenager and understood what hunger was. In my 30s I decided I wanted to garden, and I had a garden at South End/Lower Roxbury, I met my husband, and we've been gardening and fishing every since. We tried to start a farmers market in our neighborhood and we couldn't get farms to come to our neighborhood, at which point I decided to become a farmer.

SF: I grew up with gardeners, gardeners raised me, and I thought gardening was terrible and boring, and when I was 21 or so I had to take horticulture and I totally fell in love with plants and became an avid gardener. I did that throughout my 20s and was doing grant-writing full time, and decided I didn't want to do that type of work. I had also been committed to doing social justice work and ending racism, and started hearing about farming and food justice work. The idea that I could work on social justice and grow food blew my mind. That's when I decided to become an urban farmer. And I transitioned to this career 3 years ago.

JO: I feel great being up at this table with these women. I worked at ReVision Farm for 5 years. And I left to pursue a different career, and I am excited to be here.

KD: I am an apprentice with City Growers and UFI. I'm from Boston, I grew up all around Dorchester. I don't know if I want to get into why I ended up with farming, but I'm here and know I have a path, headed in the direction of rural farming, but I'm doing urban farming.

MC (moderator): How do you find the supports you need? What are the major challenges?

KD: I think I've cried to each one of these ladies about my feelings about farming, as a woman of color there weren't enough of us in the community. I was crying to Jolie one night over crop plans, etc. As far as supports, I just think (we need) as many women as possible, to support each other across cultural and racial lines, and as brother Malik and brother Julian were talking about there are bigger issues. Families, women's health, health of our communities, we need to look at each other on an individual basis and understand where we're coming from.

SF: One of the problems I see is sexual harassment. I thought about it because one of my primary supports in my early times was Jolie. I was traumatized by being hit on by people in the street. Our team has been women the whole time I've been at ReVision. It's been important to have a supervisor that's supportive and a team that we can joke with and support each other. My experience in Eastern MA has been that most of my peers are women farmers, I don't feel like women aren't supposed to be farmers, but in interactions in my job, like at Home Depot for example, men will act like I'm not strong enough, or don't know how to do something, or call me "girl" all the time, which makes me mental, excuse my language.

NCW: Definitely having network of beautiful women and beautiful people including my husband to have people to bounce things off. There are challenges, like if we're talking about farming we'll end up talking about issues around social justice. The food economy has been described as food is grown, packaged, delivered and ends up in people's bellies. Outside of that there's no connection to other things that happen in between. Access to food we grow, City Growers for instance, many other farmers you have to have a cash crop that allows you to grow your business. Being in the city we have to be responsible for getting food to people to whom food is local, but unaffordable. The prices we charge to restaurants, local people could never afford. It's good to have other organizations teaching people how to grow in their backyards. I hope this network can continue to work on these challenges to build a wholesome food economy.

MC (moderator): The ideal is that once any urban farm can scale up to a certain level, that it would be able to serve an entire urban community. But when you have a quarter acre and are working 10 hours a day, you want to be able to pay yourself. That is a dilemma at this moment.

What ideas do people have to building stronger networks?

JO: I feel like we have a pretty good network. Maybe it's a matter of keeping ourselves open, and not getting too comfortable just with each other, but being open to new people. I'm not working on a farm anymore but I still feel part of this family of women farmers, urban farmers. I don't know if newcomers think it's welcoming.

KD: I don't think it's as open, I think a stronger network would come from a more open network. A long list of women I know weren't able to come to this sold out conference. A lot of organizations and women I worked with called me and begged for a ticket, for literature. There's a network right there, as long as we can continue to build it and cultivate it. Building stronger networks will be about cultivating it with new people.

NCW: Boston Collaborative for Food & Fitness have hung out with City Growers for a few years. They're addressing things within this food system, a network that we can continue to develop and build. Build healthier communities.

MC (moderator): Conferences are a good place to network so there will be an opportunity at the end of this workshop to network, so let's make sure we do that.

Are there any questions or comments from the audience?

Comment: I like face-to-face interactions but when I think of networking I also think of social media and how that might play a role. I'm part of a "Women in the Food Movement" Facebook group which is a national group. I could envision something like that for Boston, Women in Agriculture for Boston. A lot of good discussion could come of that.

Comment: I think now that UFI has a space in Roxbury it would be wonderful if the organization could help facilitate these kinds of discussions, informally, about once a month, for people to come together, as well as through the expanded website.

Comment: I want to echo what Kafi was saying about seeing relationships between women farmers outside of dominant construct of conferences that get sold out, where people can't come and build relationships. The challenge is to think outside of those structures that exclude women across all kinds of levels and access to programs, women that are growing food for their families because that's the only way they can feed them, and create spaces we can hear those stories. The other thing is this whole thing about feminization of poverty and more women, especially women of color, being in poverty. What role do women farmers like yourselves play in addressing that issue? Thank you.

KD: The funny thing about it is, I don't want to romanticize farming. It's hard work, being in the sun. I have a day job. I have children in college. It wasn't as romanticized for me as it was politicized. What I didn't touch on was what brought me into farming. What was emotional for me is I had a small produce market, I had a business, and I couldn't decrease my prices enough to serve the community I was in. How do I pay for 450 square foot space and still have a viable income and still commit myself to the cause of bringing fresh produce to my area, which was Dorchester/Ashmont. It was about seeing families and women. Like when you watch documentaries...you become out of touch. Here are women in our community, it's not out of touch for them when it's less expensive to buy ramen noodles and Arizona tea to feed their families and right down the road there's Allendale farm. Thank God there's UFI. Often women are left out of this conversation, we're so important, regardless of education, race, whether we're on food stamps. I'm hoping through these conversations, we can start addressing these things. Make sure we all feel empowered to put a seed in the ground.

SF: People in low income communities being able to farm for themselves is about land access. What I hope is now we have more city involvement in making land available, that it becomes more available to women and anyone who wants to farm in their community, because it's not cheap. You can't just take piece of land with no money and convert it to a farm. We want it to be accessible not just for big nonprofits, or other nonprofits.

Q: You talked about challenges for women in farming. In my experience, I've been doing Jewish food justice work. There are a lot of young white women out of college connected to social justice work who are actually underrepresented. Can you comment on that?

NCW: When we, my husband and me, decided to farm, we started going to conferences and it looked a lot like it does today. Today there is a better mix of multicultural people. Other than us choosing and deciding the opportunities are there, the land and resources are available to us. All of us love to feed people in one way or another. The historical image of who's a farmer is white men. We're hoping to get a few more young, black men into farming as an enterprise, not just for the sake of growing food.

KD: I hold onto a few emails I received from organizations when I was trying to break into the industry of agriculture and farming and in one, I had said I want to feed the community and I was told to stick to community farming. I don't think I can express enough that if it wasn't for UFI and their work, how much of the life-changing event it was for me. I was already in small business, had an income, children in college, and an innate need to do something powerful in community. You can change as many people as you want but unless you change the perception of what a farmer looks like; she hasn't decided to give up on life, live with her husband and meditate and do sun salutations, not that I'm knocking it because I do sun salutations. I implore anyone who wants to learn about policy and urban farming to contact UFI, to contact Bobby and Nataka, Margaret, reach out to ReVision House, because there's something going on in that community. Either you're going to swim with that wave or let the wave overtake you. The wave that

will overtake you is more women of color and low-income women learning to farm, and for whatever reason they're farming in urban areas. You can participate with UFI, City Growers, the movement supporting low-income women with food access and sovereignty or you can watch it flourish and not have participated.

SF: Having been around a lot of white women farmers, that's not an inherent problem, but echoing what Malik was talking about, white women and white farmers in general need to do work so that those spaces feel welcoming to women of color. There's a self-reflective anti-racism and anti-classism work to be done to make room for more people.

Question: Jolie, I'm curious what you're doing now?

JO: I decided I felt the call to get involved in incarceration. I'm in a school of theology, looking to get involved in restorative justice, racism in the prison system, and getting into education around anti-racism. But that's not this what this panel is about so I'll leave that there.

KD: What would it look like for one day to have sustainable urban farming? We have a disproportionate number of men in Boston suffering from CORI (Criminal Offender Record Information). Urban farming is not a cure-all for urban communities, but it's a lot of it. UFI told me to stop crying on their shoulder and go talk to Glenn Lloyd. UFI is training people to be entrepreneurs, empowering women and men. Even if it's on the smallest scale, we can grow peppers and sell at farmers markets, or be trained to operate farm machinery. People talk about there aren't enough people, people don't know how to reach across diversity lines. They want women to farm but don't know where to find trained women who know how to use equipment. This is where ReVision house comes in. What would it look like to start dealing with homelessness issues, displaced people living in rural areas? We could train them to use their land to feed themselves. I definitely believe there's a place for farming and it would fix a lot of society's ills at this point.

MC (moderator): Unfortunately the next session is about to start and we can't take any more questions. Thank you. (Applause)