Partnership News

Green Leaf Learning Farm helps Soulsville residents access healthy foods

One man's quest to build community and combat food insecurity in South Memphis

By Katherine K. Burse, NRCS Tennessee state public affairs officer

Imagine a community where zip code areas make up a city's highest rates in poverty, school dropouts, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, gang activity, and youth violence, all while boasting the highest childhood hunger and obesity rates simultaneously.

Now imagine a lifelong resident of that very community, a person of faith, a visionary, a hard worker, a trailblazer who has devoted his time, talents, and treasures to start an organization that would serve as the foundation to address the myriad of challenges this same community faced, specifically as it relates to the need for food security and food access.

After experiencing loss first-hand from gun violence that caused the death of his childhood best friend, Marlon Foster committed his life to community development and educating youth, grades Pre-K through 12, and families in South Memphis "to maximize their potential through intellectual and character development." So, he founded the non-profit organization Knowledge Quest in 1998.

One year later, Foster began his first agricultural efforts by installing the organization's first community garden in a nearby public housing community to teach children where their food came from and to promote healthy eating and nutrition. He also wanted an activity that would bring together four generations of neighboring residents into one single activity.

On the farm, Knowledge Quest students and community members learned how to grow food in ways that built community and increased the neighborhood's access to healthy foods while decreasing the harsh realities of poverty, drugs, and criminal activity in the area.

"My vision was to grow food in ways that built community and promoted wellness," said Foster. It turns out that while we were increasing our neighborhood's access to healthy fruits and vegetables, we were supporting healthy eaters, entrepreneurs, and advocates for social and environmental justice."

Memphis ranked in the top ten of the most food insecure cities in the nation in 2010 and the nearest full-service grocery store was three miles from where Foster resides in Soulsville. Recognizing the need for food access and food security in his community, Foster began operating Green Leaf Learning Farm in 2010 as an expansion program of Knowledge Quest to support the nutritional needs of the community. He transformed 30 vacant lots and four abandoned buildings into the only USDA-certified organic micro farm operation in South Memphis.

Green Leaf Learning Farm centers on three acres in the heart of South Memphis and focuses its efforts on student education, community and economic development, and food access/food security. There Foster has planted several gardens, started culinary and gardening academies, and built dormitories to house college students who want to learn about agriculture firsthand. The farm has proven to be a model for nutrition and education but also for how other communities can rethink land use.

Over the years, Foster has led the investment of millions of dollars to promote healthy eating and community development in Soulsville. In 2012, his efforts caught the attention of former President Barack Obama, and he was honored as a champion of change as part of the nation's Winning the Future initiative. A pillar in his community, Foster continues to seek ways to expand his growing operation and was recently selected for an urban farming and education/outreach grant partnership with the Natural Resources Conservation Service in Tennessee. He currently serves as an active and valued member on the agency's State Technical Committee for Urban Agriculture in Tennessee.

Through his participation in USDA programs, Foster promoted water conservation through irrigation upgrades; partnered with other federal and non-federal agencies on education and outreach efforts; and hosted several informational sessions for regional growers in minority communities.

"USDA programs have impacted my operation by providing organic certification to Green Leaf and supplying me with the resources I need to expand my operation," said Foster. "I truly appreciate the education and outreach support by NRCS Tennessee to help steward the impact of agriculture in our region."

His future for Green Leaf Learning Farm is to continue to grow his operation by incorporating indoor agriculture on the farm with additional high tunnels and also to further develop his education and agritourism efforts and on-site retail options through the renovation of two vacant buildings. One building will be converted into a corner store and the other will host his culinary academy and a farm-to-table restaurant concept.

Foster is a shining example of how to lead by example while continuing to live, work, and worship in the same historically underserved community he has loved and cherished his entire life.

Top right photo: Lifelong Memphis resident, Marlon Foster is the founder and chief executive officer of Knowledge Quest and Green Leaf Farm. Photo by Nathan Lambrecht.

Right middle photo: The Grizzlies Garden Project Pavilion is the centerpiece of the expansion of Green Leaf Farm through a partnership with Knowledge Quest and the Memphis Grizzlies.

Right Middle photo: A view inside Green Leaf Farm's newly constructed high tunnel that was procured through a Tennessee USDA NRCS competitive funded grant.

Right middle photo: A partial view of Green Leaf Farm, the only USDA-certified organic micro farm operation in South Memphis.

Bottom right photo: Marlon Foster, a lifelong Memphis resident and founder and chief executive officer of Knowledge Quest and Green Leaf Farm, speaks with USDA NRCS representatives during an Urban Agriculture tour stop at Green Leaf Farm.