

**When Joe Cimperman sees an empty city lot, he sees a potential field of green—and the promise of a food revolution.**

By **Hannah Wallace**  
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**1** IN CLEVELAND

“**A**griculture is in our DNA. We’re African-American, Eastern European, Puerto Rican, Italian. Our families aren’t far from the generations that farmed to survive.” City councilman Joe Cimperman, 41, is talking with the

exuberance of a child as he weaves his beat-up Subaru Outback through Cleveland traffic. He’s trying to put his finger on why his hometown has become a poster child for the urban farming movement. Though media reports portray Cleveland as just another symbol of urban decay, with a dwindling population, a 34 percent poverty level and roughly 20,000 vacant lots, Cimperman is interested in a different narrative. The son of a Slovenian immigrant, he grew up in Cleveland’s St. Clair-Superior neighborhood with a big, backyard vegetable garden. To Cimperman, vacant lots are an opportunity, not a sign of blight.

Pulling up behind Riverview Towers, a high-rise public housing complex in the Ohio City neighborhood, he bounds out of the car and leads me to a long expanse of land adjacent to the brick towers. At the height of summer, Ohio City Farm, which is one of the largest contiguous urban farms in the country, teems with tomatoes, squash, watermelon, peas, peppers, and corn—plus strawberries, raspberries, and blueberries. It’s a scene that could be anywhere in the Ohio countryside, if it weren’t for the concrete-and-glass skyline of downtown Cleveland across the Cuyahoga River.

“This is what’s next,” Cimperman says, holding out his hand.



**Field Notes**  
Cimperman helped the organic, 6-acre Ohio City Farm to sprout.

Cimperman was central to the planning of Ohio City Farm, which is an unusual collaboration between public and private entities. Located on land owned by the Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority, it's managed by Ohio City's community development corporation, which licenses the land (at no cost) to four organizations that maintain separate farms. Two, Refugee Response and Cleveland Crops, are job-training programs—one for resettled refugees from countries such as

zoning legislation at a time when no other city in the U.S. had done so, and spearheaded a local food procurement ordinance that gives companies who do business with the city a bid discount for sourcing food locally. In 2009, he sponsored so-called "chicken and bees" legislation, which allows residents to keep up to six chickens and two beehives in their backyards or on vacant lots. He was ridiculed for it at the time—colleagues did the chicken dance as they passed him in the hallway—but today both

public schools—are in the pipeline. Though the trans fat ban was overturned by Ohio's state legislature last June, the City of Cleveland is now suing the state for the right to reinstate it. Cimperman is leading the effort.

**O**HIO CITY FARM is the most visible sign of Cleveland's agricultural renaissance. But it's hardly the only one. Over the past few years, farms and orchards have sprouted up all over the map. In fact, this post-industrial city, once rife with steel yards and automobile factories, now has more than 200 community gardens, 30-plus market gardens (where urban gardeners sell their produce), and nearly 20 farmers' markets, all of which accept food stamps. Many of these are located in food deserts—neighborhoods where fast food is easier to find than groceries. There's even a vineyard on a busy corner in Hough, a neighborhood known more for gang activity than for merlot sipping. Keeping all of these new farmers in business are dozens of excellent farm-to-table restaurants. Cleveland edged out London and Toronto to host an international public markets conference this fall, in part to honor the city's glorious West Side Market, which turns 100 this year. The final sign that Cleveland's local food movement has arrived? This spring saw the launch of *Edible Cleveland*, the culinary news magazine that celebrates local family farmers, chefs, and food artisans.

"I think the movement in Cleveland is here to stay," says Michael Shuman, an economist who studies local food systems. Shuman's 2010 local food assessment of northeastern Ohio predicted that, with the right investments, the 16-county region could meet a quarter of its own food needs over the next decade. The Greater

Burma and Liberia, the other for developmentally disabled adults.

One of Ohio City Farm's missions is to incubate new farmers. But it has another purpose: to provide affordable, organic produce to the community—particularly the low-income seniors who live in Riverview Towers. Residents of the housing complex who join its "Green Team" get paid minimum wage to tend a small plot at the farm and can take home as much produce as their families can eat.

But Ohio City Farm is just one of Cimperman's pet projects. In his 16 years as a councilman, he has passed pioneering urban farm

raising hens and beekeeping are popular pastimes in Cleveland.

In 2011, Cimperman, chair of the city's public health committee, helped shape Mayor Frank Jackson's "Healthy Cleveland" resolution, a series of audacious public health goals that was crafted in conjunction with four local hospitals, including the Cleveland Clinic. A handful of these have already been passed by City Council: outlawing smoking in public spaces and banning artery-clogging trans fats at restaurant chains and bakeries. Several other pieces of legislation—including one that would improve food in



**Can You Dig It?** Paul Rogers buries compost in his Kentucky Garden plot. Opposite: Dumitru Pantache, another longtime member, plants a thought with Cimperman.

Cleveland area has a diverse food economy with "lots and lots of food activities in almost every sector," says Shuman. Cimperman's leadership has been crucial. "He helped bring his city around to these trends faster than most other major metro areas," Shuman says.

"Joe is a politician who truly cares about social justice," echoes John Mitterholzer, senior program officer for the environment at the George Gund Foundation. The foundation, which gives away \$20 million a year, is a critical player in Cleveland's quest to spread food justice—the concept that fresh, healthy food should be affordable and accessible to everyone, regardless of income level.

Two years ago, Mitterholzer was trying to figure out how to get more city farmers' markets to accept food stamps, which are now

known as SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits. At the time, only two had the wireless machines used to swipe the SNAP card. Cimperman knew that Morgan Taggart, program specialist at Ohio State University Extension, had been researching the same issue, so he called a meeting with Taggart, Mitterholzer, and other key players in the city's food justice movement.

Cimperman wasted no time getting down to business. "He told us it was time to stop talking and design a program. We literally designed the pilot project at that meeting," Mitterholzer says.

It launched in June 2010 at four farmers' markets. The George Gund Foundation funded the machines as well as an incentive program: When shoppers spend \$5 in SNAP benefits at a market,

they get an extra \$5 to spend there. This "double-value" system is now at 18 out of Cuyahoga County's 25 farmers' markets.

**W**HILE AT LUNCH at the farm-to-table restaurant Fat Cats, it's hard to get a word in edgewise while Cimperman is on the subject of health inequalities. "Kids are diabetic beyond belief!" he cries. "We have some amazing hospitals in Cleveland, and the pediatric surgeons will tell you how sick and tired they are of taking spleens out of 10-year-olds. 10-year-olds!" He is deeply compassionate, and it soon becomes clear why. Before he entered politics, he was on track to become a Jesuit priest. At Saint Ignatius High School and John Carroll University, Cimperman was encouraged to fight injustice.

After graduation, he did just that, joining the Jesuit Volunteer Corps to work with developmentally disabled adults and AIDS patients. It wasn't until 1995 that he changed his career path. While working as an outreach coordinator at a home-

The only way to save the garden, OSU Extension's Morgan Taggart told Cimperman, was to change the zoning code.

Thus began what Cimperman jokingly refers to as "the education of a councilman." The teachers?



**Room to Grow**  
A resident of Riverview Towers buries seedlings at Ohio City Farm.

less shelter, he began attending community meetings and volunteering for friends' political campaigns. In 1997, he ran for City Council and won.

But to fully understand Cimperman's commitment to social justice, you need to know the story of St. Paul's Patch. The 5,000-square-foot plot was a flourishing community garden on a city-owned lot in Ohio City that many families relied upon as their main source of food. In 2006, a group of gardeners asked Cimperman for help protecting the garden, which was in danger of being destroyed by a private developer who intimidated the gardeners by telling them they were breaking the law. They weren't—Cleveland has long allowed people to garden in vacant lots—but they also didn't have any legal tenure to the land.

Taggart and her then-colleague at OSU Extension, Julia Barton; Kristen Trolio, then at the Cleveland Botanical Garden; and Marge Misak, of the land trust program at Neighborhood Housing Services of Greater Cleveland.

During the housing crisis, thousands of foreclosed homes in Cleveland were demolished. The resulting vacant lots have all fallen into the city's "land bank"—a reserve that now contains 7,400 of the city's 20,000 vacant lots. When selling off land bank lots, city planners typically give preference to homeowners or businesses, who they assume will make "the highest and best use" of the land. What Misak and crew wanted to do was flip that on its head, deeming community gardens and urban farms the highest and best use.

The four women drafted a code

that would require the city to go through the same public process that a private landowner goes through when changing zoning: neighbor notification, public hearings, and approval by the planning commission. Gardeners, then, would get notice of any plan to convert city land bank lots to another use—and have the opportunity to organize against it. The Urban Garden District legislation was adopted by City Council in 2007. "Now people think twice about threatening gardeners," Cimperman says, chuckling.

Suddenly Cleveland was an ideal environment for agri-entrepreneurs like Mansfield Frazier—the man behind the vineyards at Chateau Hough. Visiting him at

**"They don't question why we ship bell peppers from California to Cleveland and burn fossil fuels to do it. It's cheaper, yes. But will it employ people? Is it healthier?"**

his orderly, three-quarter-acre vineyard on the corner of East 66th Street and Hough Avenue, Frazier says he wouldn't have gone forward with the idea if it hadn't been for Cimperman's 2007 zoning ordinance.

"These are city boys," Frazier says of other city council members. "They don't question why we ship bell peppers from California to Cleveland and burn fossil fuels to do it. It's cheaper, yes. But will

it employ people? Is it healthier? We've got to turn the pyramid on its head. Joe has that vision."

**O**N A BRISK Saturday morning in early April, I tour Kentucky Gardens, one of the city's oldest and loveliest community gardens, located in Ohio City's Fairview Park. It has been threatened several times over the years, and members have fought fiercely to protect it.

Masud Hasan, a 44-year-old computer programmer, has one of the most impressive plots, especially for this time of year. He peels back the polypropylene fabric that allows rain and sun in while protecting the veggies from frost, to show me his winter harvest: butter crunch lettuce, sweet chard, carrots, spinach, and cilantro.

Phyllis Bambeck, a retired elementary school teacher whose orange-tinted hair is pulled back in a red scarf, tells me that thanks to the garden, she's able to keep her weekly grocery bill under \$10. (It helps that she has six egg-laying hens at home.) Bambeck, who has gardened here for more than 30 years, was garden coordinator in 2002 when Fairview Park advocates proposed reducing the garden's size to make way for a fountain and a dog run.

She met with Cimperman and gave him an earful about the importance of community gardens, particularly organic ones like Kentucky. When the garden zoning legislation passed, Kentucky was one of the first community gardens to take advantage of it.

It's been a decade since Cimperman met Bambeck, but she left a deep impression on him. "She canned food from the garden for sustenance. She had a job, she raised her kids. But she absolutely needed the food she was growing," Cimperman recalls. "This—urban agriculture—is worth preserving."

1 IN CHICAGO



**Thanks to Julieanna Richardson, the voices of unsung heroes of black history can now be heard.**

As a college student in the '70s, Julieanna Richardson interviewed actress Thelma "Butterfly" McQueen, as well as Harlem Renaissance figures Leigh Whipper and Raoul Abdul, as part of an oral history project. "When I was growing up, I didn't know much about black history," she says. "After that, I felt like I had found a part of myself." But it wasn't until 1999, after a nearly 20-year career in law, television, and theater, that Richardson launched The HistoryMakers, an African-American oral history archive that showcases filmed conversations with black achievers. With a goal of caching 5,000 interviews, Richardson and crew have spoken with everyone from Alonzo Pettie (who after being barred from white rodeos, started one for blacks) to Barack Obama and children's advocate Marian Wright Edelman. "Everyone from DreamWorks Animation to the BBC is accessing the digital archives," Richardson reports. "I want to reawaken people's curiosity about history we haven't known about. There are wonderfully rich stories that show the strength of a people to overcome." —Amanda Gleason