

NATURAL TALENT



A Seed Grows in Oakland

In an urban food desert, one community activist is making it easy for locals to get their greens BY HANNAH WALLACE

NIKKI HENDERSON GREW UP with “foster brothers too numerous to count,” but her mom always found a way to put fresh vegetables on the table: “She would blanch broccoli and asparagus and add a little seasoning,” Henderson recalls. Her parents, who had seen the dangers of diet-related disease up close, were adamant that their kids eat healthfully. “My aunt had diabetes. My grandfather had diabetes. And my great-aunt and great-uncle are both amputees, due to diabetes.”

Emboldened by stints working with advocacy groups such as Slow Food USA and Van Jones’s Green for All (and inspired by Michelle Obama’s White House garden), Henderson signed on as executive director of People’s Grocery, a West Oakland–based nonprofit devoted to urban agriculture, in 2010. In the poverty-stricken neighborhood, it’s much easier to find liquor shops and fast-food outlets than it is full-service grocery stores, and according to a regional study, West Oakland has the highest rates of heart disease, obesity, and diabetes in the county.

VITALS

AGE 27

LOCATION
Oakland, CA

OCCUPATION
Executive director of People’s Grocery, a nonprofit focused on improving West Oakland through its food system

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FACTS ABOUT HENDERSON

1 SHE’S A FAIRLY RECENT KALE CONVERT

“I didn’t try it until I was twenty-three. I was like, ‘These aren’t collards!’”

2 SHE TWEETS (@PEOPLES GROCERY)

“My favorite feeds are @bryantterry, @usda, @tom philpott, and @michaelpollan.”

3 SHE’S NOT OUTDOORSY

“I’m a wuss. I’d probably opt out of a river-rafting trip just to avoid potentially coming into contact with cold water.”

People’s Grocery has been operating a garden in the neighborhood for a decade, and Henderson recently spearheaded a collaboration with nearby Dig Deep Farms to supply weekly “grub boxes”—shares of organic produce—to up to 100 locals. The boxes start at \$10 for 5 pounds and can be paid for using SNAP benefits (food stamps). “Occasionally we get people who ask why the box doesn’t include mangoes or pineapples,” says Henderson. “Then we use that as an opportunity to get into the whole pineapple-doesn’t-grow-here conversation.”

Such lessons are crucial to the other part of the UCLA grad’s mission: boosting food literacy. People’s Grocery holds weekly “harvest parties,” featuring produce-packed dinners and nutrition workshops, at its organic garden and greenhouse in the yard of a neighboring housing project. And last year Henderson co-taught an Edible Education class (with food writer and UC Berkeley professor Michael Pollan), in which participants explored the intersection of the Slow Food and food-justice movements.

She and her small staff also tap new blood via an organization called the Growing Justice Institute. Workshops addressing topics like urban agriculture and community organizing encourage activists to find solutions for problems on their own blocks. “We have to shift policies if we want tangible changes,” she says, suggesting that folks begin by educating themselves about the Farm Bill (“People don’t realize you can buy gardening supplies with food stamps”), researching local food-policy councils at foodsecurity.org, and growing and sharing food. “Change can happen, neighborhood by neighborhood.”