# GROWING FOOD JUSTICE

*Denver Metro's growing movement serves up justice to the hungry.*

**BY LARA HERRINGTON WATSON**
**PHOTOS BY KEVIN LOWRY**

**THE ELYRIA SWANSEA NEIGHBORHOOD** in Denver sits on an awkward residential-industrial intersection. Homes and crosswalks bump up against railroad tracks that bisect the neighborhood. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has named it one of most polluted neighborhoods in Colorado. Contaminated soil and air from a disproportional number of refineries and plants, and pollution from the highway and diesel trucks plague the neighborhood.

Alicia Perez, 20, moved from Mexico to this vibrant, proud neighborhood when she was two. Now a wife and mother, she is raising her one-year-old son here.

But Perez and the rest of the neighborhood's 10,000 residents, mostly Mexican or Latino immigrants, lack access to banks, pharmacies, and grocery stores. They get their food mainly from corner stores or the Super Walmart three miles away in Commerce City. This lack of access to grocery stores constitutes an "urban food desert"—as defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)—one of dozens in Denver.

Perez loves her neighborhood and has high hopes for it. "I have friends and family who live here," she said. "We can't really afford to move to a nice neighborhood. We've been here for so long that we all really know each other."

Grocery stores seem to be avoiding neighborhoods like Perez's, so instead of waiting for the stores, creative, local whole food solutions are popping up all over Denver for low-income neighborhoods and families.

In Perez's neighborhood, one of those solutions is GrowHaus, a local non-profit hydrofarm and USDA grant-funded greenhouse.

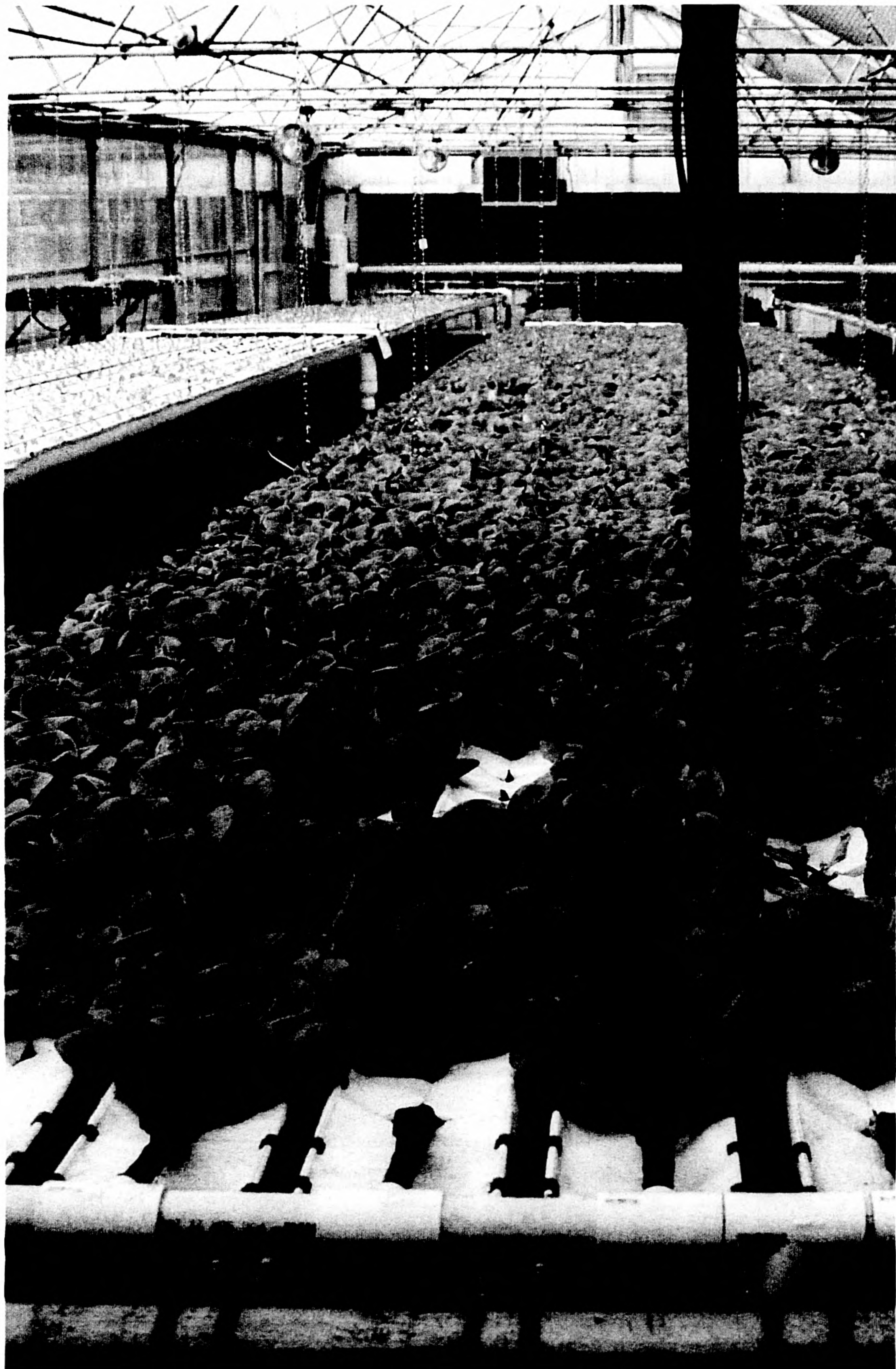
The GrowHaus produces lettuce and herbs through two systems: hydroponics and aquaponic. Hydroponics uses a recirculating nutrient solution instead of soil, and aquaponic uses fish, such as tilapia and bass, to fertilize the plants, while the plants clean and filter the water that returns to the fish tank. GrowHaus sells 60 to 70 percent of its produce to places like Whole Foods and sets aside the rest for their community food program.

Perez has been involved with nearby GrowHaus since 2011. She helps administer GrowHaus' fresh box program on Saturdays. Each food box comes with an explanation of the produce nutrients and how to use them, in English and Spanish.

GrowHaus has become a central part of her community, alleviating the burden of accessing healthy food. "Some people do have cars here, but it's hard for most people to go to Walmart because it's really far," Perez said. "This place is really convenient. I can bring my son and we can just walk here. We want to make this our market."

She hopes her neighbors, friends, and family will become involved with GrowHaus.

"I want to help people learn how to eat healthy and so I've been learning some of the health benefits of eating different food, of the fruits and vegetables. So my mission is to bring in more people," Perez said.



THE GROWHAUS PRODUCES LETTUCE AND HERBS THROUGH HYDROPONICS AND AQUAPONIC SYSTEMS. IT SELLS 60 TO 70 PERCENT OF ITS PRODUCE AND SETS ASIDE THE REST FOR THEIR COMMUNITY FOOD PROGRAM.

THE GROWHAUS A GREEN HAVEN IN DENVER'S ELYRIA SWANSEA, WHERE THE HIGHWAY AND INDUSTRY DOMINATE OVER FRESH FOOD AND GREEN SPACE.

### MAKING HEALTHY FOOD SUSTAINABLE

Most people don't enter urban farming for the money, but it's an important consideration for making organic operations functional and sustainable.

Aleece Raw opened an organic restaurant in 2012. "Like a lot of people I know, I woke up to food because of my health," she said. When her sister died of ovarian cancer five years ago, "I felt the bulls-eye on my forehead."

Determined to minimize her risk of cancer and make the rest of her life count, Raw left corporate marketing and after a few years of exploration and schooling, focused on her mission: eating good food and providing it for others. She bought a restaurant, renamed it The Garden, and created meals from organic-only ingredients. But soon encountered the same difficulty that many garden-to-table restaurants face.

"There is such a need for good food in Northeast Park Hill," Raw said, but her organic restaurant and the needs of the neighborhood didn't mesh. "I could never get enough people in here to cover the cost of labor. The numbers don't work, unless you charge really high prices or incorporate free labor into your business model."

The restaurant ceased operating in April, and Reece has been operating the building as an event space.

But committed to her food mission, she also formed the Sunshine Food Project. Sunshine's board decided not to open a grocery store, or approach others, after market research showed the area wasn't densely populated enough to make it economically viable. They instead developed a plan for a cooperative.

"The co-op model can work well because you reduce labor costs by members working. They maintain equity in the company and a stake in the future," Raw said.

Her goal is to generate profit and give members living salaries over time. "We want to think like a for-profit company but keep things affordable."

For every 10 paying members, Sunshine will accept one work-for-credit member. The latter will work in the Sunshine gardens with other members but is not required to pay dues. Members will decide what percentage of produce goes to members, to underserved folks in the neighborhood, and to existing food pantries.

For now, Sunshine Food Project runs a bulk food-buying club out of The Garden space. They sell organic pantry items and food grown in Sunshine's gardens, and will soon partner with other farms to supplement its inventory.

Some local gardeners are hoping to create demand to ensure local organic farming remains viable. Like Barbara Moore.

Similar to Raw, Moore became a food reform advocate following a 2001 cancer diagnosis and her ensuing food research. She was unnerved by the discovery of America's industry of chemically-grown food. Her simple garden suddenly seemed too recreational, so she bought a greenhouse in Lakewood. She farms and educates year round at Harvest Mountain Farm Gardens.

Moore has great expectations, but no grand delusions, about organic agriculture. She said her operation is a "shoe string" and she depends on volunteers and interns to stay in business. She sells produce to organic restaurants like Linger and Root Down. "Some people are really romantic about this, saying you don't need money in organic farming, but you do," Moore says.

Determined to increase demand for organic food, Moore focuses on educating consumers about its value. In a free market, she said, it has to make financial and economic sense to families, from low-income to middle-class to the wealthy.

"You have to get kids to taste produce, and you can't educate the kids without educating the parents. You can work with palates, play with recipes, but you can't change from Cheetos to kale unless you appreciate the difference."

Denver Urban Gardens (DUG) is acting on that goal. They support youth farmers markets through elementary schools where students grow and sell produce, and Slow Food Denver's garden-to-cafeteria food movement, ensuring food grown in school gardens goes into school lunches.

"If kids participate in growing vegetables they're more likely to eat them," said Abbie Noriega, DUG's spokesperson.

Ultimately, Moore believes there has to be a paradigm shift of our culture's ideas about food.

"Marketing is oriented toward cheap food," she said. "How do we shift culture without knowledge? High school kids care about the brand, quality and make of their jeans. What if we showed kids different qualities of food?"

### COMMUNITY AND HOME GARDENS

Nationally, community gardens are rising in popularity as a method to grow local, organic food in urban areas. The National Gardening Association reported that in 2013 two million more households grew gardens than the year before, a two percent increase. That's a small jump compared to the recent past—when between 2007 and 2008, the number jumped by seven million households, or 10 percent at that time.

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DENVER'S ELYRIA SWANSEA IS ONE OF THE MOST POLLUTED NEIGHBORHOODS IN COLORADO, ACCORDING TO THE EPA, DUE TO ITS PROXIMITY TO THE HIGHWAY AND PLANTS LIKE THE PURINA FACTORY.

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Locally, DUG networks with over 120 communities to support such gardens. The nonprofit takes care of most logistics—from fundraising to education, even providing seedlings and carrying liability and lease agreements. The community manages day-to-day care and management, including scheduling volunteers, assigning plots and duties, and harvesting.

Education programs provide resources to make these gardens sustainable. Cooking classes from local chefs teach gardeners to turn produce into meals. Trainings in food preservation help people get through the winter months.

"We're just connecting the dots," said Reuben Gregory, a master gardener at several low-income DUG and Northeast Denver Housing Center gardens. "It's one thing to receive vegetables, but what's going to happen if you don't know what to do with them?" Gregory brings Cooking Matters educators to help his gardeners understand how to cook their produce.

Community gardens provide a center of community, a factor almost as important as the food for the neighborhood, said Noriega. "We never go into a neighborhood and tell them what they need. We wait for them to approach us."

Gregory hopes to find a way to connect the Northeast Housing residents that work in his gardens with the greater neighborhood.

"It sounds easy on paper. But it's hard because there are a lot of cultural barriers," he said. "But gardening side-by-side is one thing that supersedes that. Connecting with nature, especially in the city, and doing it alongside people you might not have other things in common with isn't restricted to a type or class. What's the one thing every human being needs? It's food."

Gregory is excited about his Lowry site, a garden for formerly homeless, where he runs a small food pantry supplemented with food from the garden.

"It took off and the residents have totally taken it over," he said. "It's a really creative garden. Residents scrapped through alleys and have built really elaborate structures."

Gregory has seen gardens transform people, especially one resident at the Lowry garden. "It's given him so much purpose. He's so driven to grow food for himself, but mostly for the community. It's his way of serving the (other residents) when he hasn't really been able to connect with them."

**FILLING FOOD BANKS AND HONORING FOOD STAMPS**

DUG's community gardens help families avoid common barriers to food assistance.

"People feel ashamed about accepting assistance. Instead we provide resources and space. People are really growing their own food," said DUG's Noriega. "It's long-term food security, not emergency-aid, for people in need."

And whatever the community can't eat often goes to local food banks, helping those without the time for gardening.

Annually, DUG's network donates about 27 tons of food to local food pantries or directly to families in need—last year it gave to 41 organizations.

It can be tough to coordinate a garden's excess food and what a food pantry can use, and most food pantries don't have cold storage. So DUG has teamed up with Produce for Pantries, a garden-to-table network dedicated to smoothing out the logistics of the food distribution. DUG has two cold storage spaces (one sponsored by Whole Foods) for gardeners to store donated produce for food banks. Gardeners can drop off food at DUG's cold storage and pantry volunteers can pick up what they will actually use.

This is an important step in making sure the food-insecure get fed well, Noriega said.

Donated rotten fruits and vegetables were the inspiration for Brad Birky and his wife Libby to start So All May Eat (SAME) Café.

A pay-what-you-can eatery, SAME Café was created to help Denver's homeless and food-insecure population eat well consistently.

The cafe cooks in-season food, pickling and canning the surplus. Birky prefers organic food, but "fresh" is the most important standard—while working in soup kitchens and Catholic charities in Illinois, he saw a lot of food rot during transport. "So much rotten food is donated, it's a shame," he said. *(Editorial Note: Brad Birky is a member of the Denver* VOICE *board of directors).*

At SAME, customers pay what they can, and if they don't have any money they can work in exchange for a meal.

"People tend to gravitate toward that dignified exchange," Birky said. "If we made it free, many regular paying customers wouldn't come in at all. This way, it's open to all."

Another pay-what-you-can café, Café 180, on Broadway in Englewood, was inspired by SAME and has a similar function, said employee Sarah Lesyinski. Café 180 implements organic food as much as possible, sourcing some of its produce through its community garden at Bishop Elementary School.

Another option for fresh food access are farmers markets—where food from nearby farms reaches the urban dweller directly. But the typical cash-only markets deter families and individuals on food stamps. DUG is trying to change that.

DUG is working with farmers' markets to increase the use of Supplemental Food Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, or food stamps, through the use of Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) machines at farmers' markets. They have run communication campaigns to let consumers know they can use their benefits at farmers' markets, and have developed toolkits for markets wanting to start accepting SNAP.

"There is a stigma around the cost of produce at farmers' markets," said Shannon Spurlock, DUG's community initiatives coordinator. "Sometimes this is true, other times there are ways to shop there that help you stretch your budget."

Right now two DUG markets and its youth market accepts food stamps. DUG's goal is to make EBT machines more accessible to markets, which makes produce more accessible to low-income consumers.

Getting an EBT machine is not easy. To apply for one, a market must first become Food and Nutrition Service-certified through USDA. The application process itself is challenging, but "the local USDA office has been really helpful in working with applications here," Spurlock said.

**ACCEPT FOOD STAMPS AT YOUR MARKET**

**Find out how at**
www.fns.usda.gov/snap/retailers-0

For a toolkit, contact DUG at
dirt@dug.org or 303.292.9900

HOMES IN THE ELYRIA SWANSEA NEIGHBORHOOD LIVE RIGHT NEXT TO HIGHWAY, CREATING A TOXIC ATMOSPHERE. IT'S NEIGHBORHOODS LIKE THIS THAT OFTEN HAVE LESS ACCESS TO FRESH, HEALTHY FOOD.

**URBAN BARN RAISING**

But fresh food isn't just about fruits and vegetables—what about meat?

James Bertini has worked extensively behind the scenes to make urban farming more feasible.

A lifelong gardener and owner of Denver Urban Homesteading, Bertini had to get politically active to modify Denver legislation intended to emphasize the rural-urban divide.

Four years ago Bertini and his wife decided to raise chickens, but a 50-year-old zoning ordinance made it difficult for them. It would have cost $150 for first application, and $70 each year to renew their license. Permit applicants had to visit two city departments and would have to post signs in their yard and get neighbor approval.

The cost and time to attain the permits negated the financial benefits of having the chickens, and Bertini saw it as an obvious barrier to low-income individuals, who could benefit most if they could raise their own food.

"The financial cost and the time and trouble of getting a permit before the law changed made it impracticable for almost anyone who wanted to have chickens," he said. "Probably the financial cost of building the coop and paying the permitting fees negated the financial benefits the chickens could bring."

After two years of lobbying, Bertini convinced Denver's City Council to enact a moderate permitting law. Now a one-time $25 license fee allows a household to have up to eight chickens and/or ducks and two small goats. The more complex and expensive permitting process is still in place for people who want nine or more poultry or three or more goats.

**FAITHFUL TO THE LOCAL FOOD MOVEMENT**

Churches have traditionally provided emergency food aid to the hungry. But as more community food initiatives provide long-term food solutions to the hungry, advocates of the local food movement want to see churches provide healthier food.

The local Food and Justice Initiative (FJI) is active in helping churches decide how to transform food charity into food justice.

"The purpose of food banks has shifted in the past 20 years," said Stephanie Price, pastor at Hope United Methodist Church. "Where they used to be primarily for emergency food assistance they are now a regular source of food that people depend on. The sad truth is that non-perishable donations are no longer a 'requirement' since the shelves are emptied out each week."

Price, who consults for the Rocky Mountain Farmers Union and founded FJI, said it can be tricky to get churches to question the food offered in charity because what they offer to those in need is usually what they're feeding their own family. "It's an educational process of changing the way we look at food, our health, our lifestyles," she said.

FJI also encourages churches to use their land to garden and provide healthy food for the hungry.

**"CHARITY ASKS, CAN WE FEED YOU? JUSTICE ASKS, WHY ARE YOU HUNGRY?"**

"We are commissioned to go out into the world and care for those the world has defined as the least, and yet we often sit in big buildings with large properties that are generally unused," said Price.

"Land is the thing that a lot of [urban] gardeners want and can't find access to, so it's just using that resource that's already there," said Gregory, who along with serving as a DUG master gardener, is an active leader in FJI. "The community's already built in, so it's ready to go."

Two faith communities are experimenting with locally grown solutions.

Capitol Heights Presbyterian Church in Denver's Congress Park neighborhood is using its land to supply its Saturday lunch program for the homeless. Starting this spring, the church will be growing vegetables in raised beds between the sidewalk and the street, and the excess food will be given to lunch-goers.

Craig Broek, minister of the Table in Denver's Platt Park neighborhood, is growing both a church and urban farm. He encourages people to grow food in their yards, which are large and often unused. With this food, Broek connects with his congregation through neighbor-hosted meals and gives to food banks. In fact, he encourages members to plan their gardens so that 10 percent is grown to be donated.

Another possibility for faith communities is to transform food pantries into cooperatives, and run them more like a full grocery. Transforming a system already in place will extend hours and options of food pantries, reaching more people, Gregory said.

"The purpose of the church is to transform the world and I believe cooperatives are transformative entities," Price said. "Traditionally, models of charity aren't set up to transform the world as much as they are to meet emergency needs. Charity asks, can we feed you? Justice asks, why are you hungry? Cooperatives offer an alternative both to the popular charitable model as well as an alternative to our current economic system, which depends on an unequal distribution of wealth."

These are still new ideas in a long tradition of feeding people, but Gregory has seen many churches realize the impact these changes can have on the neighborhood. ▪