

Making It Happen

Zora Margolis

Tanikka Cunningham is a tenacious woman who believes **everyone** in her neighborhood **should have access to fresh food.**



Adozen high-spirited children are running around inside the Riverside Community Center at Marvin Gaye Park in D.C.'s Ward 7. Chomping on apples, they're wiping down and setting the tables where they've been decorating butternut squash cupcakes made in the weekly cooking class. Some of their parents are there, too. Most live in housing projects nearby.

When Tanikka Cunningham started a farmers market at the Riverside Center, there were kids who'd never tasted a plum, seen a green bean that hadn't come out of a can, or eaten anything remotely like the kale and bean stew they've helped prepare for dinner tonight. While the class participants eat, shoppers wander in, some using EBT cards (aka food stamps), WIC checks, or Seniors Get Fresh vouchers to buy apples, freshly-dug sweet potatoes, and bunches of carrots, collards, and kale. Everything is fresh, local, and organic.

And inexpensive.

Turning the Tide

"The popularity of the farmers market and the cooking classes are a testament to the quality and affordability of the food that Tanikka provides," says Autumn Saxton-Ross, director of health at the Riverside Center. "There's no comparison with what's available at the Safeway on 17th and Benning."

"I don't get much sleep," admits 30-year-old Tanikka Cunningham, executive director of Healthy Solutions, the

Anacostia-based nonprofit organization she founded. These days, in addition to the weekly Riverside Center market, she supplies twice-monthly boxes of fresh, mostly organic produce to hundreds of households in Wards 7 and 8 through a co-op

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— Tanikka Cunningham,
executive director of Healthy Solutions

she calls "The Freggie Box Program." She has also been supplying the fresh produce for seven convenience stores participating in D.C.'s Food Research and Action Center's Healthy Corner Store Program, which aims to increase the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables to residents of the so-called food desert east of the Anacostia River. (She soon will be supplying the entire program.)

Another reason for her sleep deprivation? Cunningham is the mother of four children under the age of seven, whom she homeschools.

The cooperative that Tanikka Cunningham started recently made organic oranges available for \$0.25 each—when they were selling for \$1.00 at stores over the river.

A (Closer to) Home-Based Business

"It all started with canned fruit cocktail," laughs Cunningham. Back in 2003, this native of Riverdale, Maryland, was a new mother who had recently left a job in the emergency room at George Washington University Hospital. Her sister, Latisha Watford, was a new mother, too, and had just moved to North Carolina, where the two had spent summers with their sharecropper grandparents. Both wanted to find a way to work from home. They looked into government contracts.

They found one: supplying canned fruit to the North Carolina prison system. One contract led to another. By late 2004, they had a \$6.5 million dollar contract to supply produce to the U.S. military. They developed their own network of large and small farmers to provide them with product and even studied to become USDA inspectors.

It was exhilarating but exhausting. They found themselves moving 100,000 pounds of produce in and out of their Tidewater warehouse on a daily basis, unloading trucks until 4 a.m., seeing their husbands and children only on weekends. "It was no way to live," Cunningham says. "For our families' sakes, in May 2005, we closed the business."

Back in Anacostia, she decided to apply her skills and contacts to doing what she could about the lack of high-quality produce in her neighborhood, east of the Anacostia River. She started a cooperative at the Benning Terrace housing project, distributing Freggie Boxes and selling produce, essentially at her cost. She taught business skills to teenagers even as she introduced them and their parents to the benefits of eating a healthier diet.

Then the D.C. Housing Authority kicked her out, because, as she was told, "If it's a business, it can't be run on government property." Ironically, the same D.C. government is working on a study to find ways to combat obesity and improve diet and health outcomes. Cunningham has been unable to find another space nearby.

A Woman of Action

Cunningham explains why the Anacostia farmers market closed after a year: Most of the market's produce came from the same gleaning program that supplies D.C. area food banks and programs that feed the homeless. "If you usually give this to the food banks basically for free, because it is second quality, why ask people to pay for it?" asks Cunningham. "Our thought is that the best food should be available and affordable to the people in this community."

She's planning a special co-op box for Thanksgiving and Christmas deliveries, called "Healthy for the Holidays," working with the Ward 7 councilperson's office and the local Boys and Girls Club. In addition to carrying fresh produce, the boxes will contain a fresh turkey, eggs, milk, and other holiday foods. Door-to-door delivery will be provided for senior citizens.

No stranger to grant proposals and program evaluation reports, Cunningham is fundamentally a woman of action. She's not paying herself a salary right now, but she's making sure that the underserved people who participate in her cooperative get freshly picked, organically grown oranges from Florida at four for a dollar—the very same oranges that sell for a dollar apiece at the gleaming supermarkets across the river.

Zora Margolis has lived in Washington, D.C., since 1996. She wrote about the Dupont Circle farmers market in the Aug./Sept. issue of Flavor and co-hosts the farmers market forum on www.donrockwell.com, D.C.'s popular food lovers' discussion site.

Food Research and Action Center www.frac.org

Healthy Solutions www.healthysolutionsgroup.org


The Riverside Center www.washingtonparks.net/riverside.html




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