DAILYGOOD
News that Inspires

America's Most Tenacious Gardeners
by Kristin Moe

Nohemi Soria and Pedro Rodriguez harvest collard greens in Camden, N.J. Photo by Kristin Moe.

These are Pedro Rodriguez's chickens, in alphabetical order: Bella, Blanche, Dominique, Flo, Flossie, Lucy, Pauline, Una, and Victoria. Their coop occupies one corner of a vacant-lot-turned-garden in Camden, New Jersey. It's an oasis of abundance and order in a city of abandoned buildings, street trash, and drug deals that few attempt to hide.

Since 2010, the number of community gardens has more than doubled to roughly 130.

Rodriguez, 50, grew up down the street. Near the chickens, he has planted neat raised beds of corn, tomatoes, cabbage, kale, asparagus, eggplant, onion, 20 varieties of hot peppers, and broccoli. Fruit trees (cherry, apple, peach, and pear) line the perimeter of the lot, as well as two beehives. He's considering getting a goat.

To say that Camden has a bad reputation would be an understatement. Indeed, Camden, just across the Delaware River from Philadelphia, has about the worst of any city in America. It's been ranked at various times as both the poorest and the most dangerous. In 2012, it ranked as the number-one most dangerous city in the country.

Not surprisingly, Camden also gets a ton of bad press. In 2010 The Nation called it a "City of Ruins" where "those discarded as human refuse are dumped." Last year,Rolling Stone ran a devastating article by Matt Taibbi under the headline "Apocalypse, New Jersey: A Dispatch from America's Most Desperate Town," calling it "a city run by armed teenagers," "an un-Fantasy Island of extreme poverty and violence."

It's also one of the worst urban food deserts in the country. In September of 2013, the last

centrally located grocery store closed its doors, leaving the city to feed itself on Crown Chicken and junk from the corner bodegas. One supermarket remains, at the very edge of Camden's city limits—but most residents would have to cross a river and travel along a major highway to get there—a difficulty in a city where many can't afford a car. Like in many other low-income areas, obesity is an epidemic.

Most kids in Camden talk about leaving—and many of them do. The population peaked in 1950 and has since declined by nearly 40 percent to about 77,000. Anywhere between 3,000 and 9,000 houses have been abandoned, although no one knows for sure. For residents who want a better life, getting out is the most obvious thing to do.

As so many flee the violence and crime, it may seem strange that Rodriguez is literally putting down roots. In fact, it’s precisely because of the city’s problems that its urban farms have grown so much in recent years. A study by the University of Pennsylvania Center for Public Health Initiatives said in 2010 that Camden’s gardens may be the fastest growing in the country. Since then, the number of community gardens has more than doubled to roughly 130, according to a list kept by local gardeners.

The Penn study found that these gardens—belonging to churches, neighborhood organizations, and everyday backyard growers—produced the equivalent of $2.3 million in food in 2013 and, because most growers share their surplus zucchini with their neighbors, those vegetables have helped feed roughly 15 percent of Camden’s population.

The city needs fresh food, and residents are doing what it takes to grow it. It’s part of the untold story of Camden: a story in which the residents of this blighted city are the protagonists, quietly working to make Camden a place where, one day, you might want to live.

Room to grow

The success of community gardens is thanks in large part to the Camden City Garden Club, which has been supporting the city’s gardens with organizing power, education, materials, and food distribution since 1985. As you might expect, these are not your typical tea-drinking, flower-growing gardeners. These people are here to grow food. In a place where kids are said to bite into oranges, peel and all, because they’ve never eaten them before—this fills a void.

“You think of things that children shouldn’t really have to think about.”

The club’s founder and executive director, Mike Devlin, ended up in Camden in the early 70s because of a paperwork mishap during his enrollment as a law student at Rutgers. Over time, however, he found that he was more passionate about lettuces than litigation. He began building an organization whose programs now include the Camden Children’s Garden on the waterfront; Camden Grows, a program that trains new gardeners; a Food Security Council, which was soon adopted by the city; the Fresh Mobile Market, a truck that sells fresh produce in the neighborhoods and provides a place for residents to barter their surplus vegetables; a youth employment and training program that has lasted nearly two decades; and Grow Labs, a school program to teach kids about healthy food—in addition to supporting the growing network of community gardens.

And, in a city of 12,000 abandoned lots, there's plenty of room to grow. While Detroit has garnered considerable positive media attention for its urban farm movement, Camden's has been expanding more quietly.

Mike Devlin, Nohemi Soria, and Pedro Rodriguez (left to right). Photo by Kristin Moe.

Devlin's hands are deeply creased, and there's dirt lingering under his fingernails. For him, gardening is not a hobby; it's a way of confronting the myriad issues that Camdenites face—poverty, food scarcity, and the increasingly frayed bonds of community. And the best way to get at those issues, he says, is by giving the city's children a place of safety and support. More than 300 youth have gone through the Garden Club's employment programs, and countless more have spent afternoons in its leafy sanctuaries.

A city in flux

It's a sunny Tuesday in mid-May, and Devlin and Rodriguez are working at the Beckett Street Garden in south Camden. The garden straddles a single dilapidated rowhouse, now occupied only by squatters. In the heaped beds are lettuce, collards, spinach, leeks, and nice broccoli crowns big enough to harvest. A Tiger Swallowtail rests for a moment on a tomato plant nearby.

The two met in the early 80s, when Devlin helped the young Rodriguez build his first garden in an empty corner lot just a block or two from here.

Devlin walks over. "There's something going on up the street," he says, pointing. "Four cop cars up there by Pedro's house." Rodriguez walks to the curb, takes a look at the flashing lights, shrugs, and goes back to work. Normal.

On a nearby block, someone has decorated the tree trunks with brightly colored butterflies.

In another corner of the garden, Nohemi Soria, 28, is gathering big armfuls of collards. Her hair is up in a loose bun and she wears sparkly daisy-shaped earrings and a bracelet with rhinestone hearts, despite the dirt. As the USDA Community Food Access Manager, she does work for the Garden Club that's funded through federal grants, including coordination of the Mobile Market.

Both Rodriguez and Soria are among the hundreds of Camdenites who have come through the Garden Club's programs, either as volunteers or employees, and for whom the gardening scene is a little like family. Both will testify that growing food has profoundly shaped their lives.

Born 23 years apart, the two grew up in different versions of Camden. Rodriguez, one of 12 children, played handball with neighborhood kids and gleefully swam in the "swimming pools" that formed when the streets filled with water after a storm. Many of the other Puerto Ricans he grew up with came to work in the Campbell's Soup factory, which closed in 1990. By that time, the other major employers had also left town, including a number of large shipbuilding companies, as well as RCA Victor, which made phonographs and television tubes.

"Camden was once beautiful," Rodriguez says, pointing to what is left of the houses facing the Beckett Street garden. Originally owned by immigrants from Italy, he says, the apartments had marble floors, painted tiles, and ornately carved wooden fireplaces. Rodriguez remembers the Italians growing grapes in their yards and making wine in their basements.

But houses in Camden don't last long after they're abandoned. Stripped of anything valuable—marble, tile, wood, and copper—many of them now sit, gutted, awaiting demolition. "It breaks my heart to see these houses go down," Rodriguez says.

Urban farmer Pedro Rodriguez. Photo by Kristin Moe.

Then came a major riot in 1971, when Rodriguez was a boy. An article in thePhiladelphia Inquirer reported that "Bitter racial tensions exploded in the night, fueling fires that destroyed parts of Camden and hardened the lives of those who lived through it." In a story that played out in inner cities across the country, those who could afford to moved out and left a vacuum of empty houses, empty factories, and streets full of young people with nowhere to go. The 2013 Rolling Stone article observed that, "with the help of an alarmist press, the incidents solidified in the public's mind the idea that Camden was a seething, busted city, out of control with black anger."

By the time Soria was born, in 1986, the city was in full decline. Her house on York Street was also home to drug dealers who treated her front steps as their own. She remembers two guys getting shot in a car right out front.

"I always felt scared to walk outside," she says. "You think of things that children shouldn't really have to think about, and you experience things that children shouldn't have to experience."

She remembers a time, years ago, when her father tried to take her jogging in Pyne Poynt park. The two were stopped by a cop, who assumed they must be up to no good. "We had to convince him that we were just jogging for exercise," Soria says. "He didn't believe us."

Although parks were mostly off limits, she and her younger sisters had fun doing normal kid things too—well, normal for Camden. They made mud pies, constructed obstacle courses in the abandoned building next door, and baked imaginary pizzas in ovens built from scavenged bricks.

At 13, Soria crossed the Delaware River into Philadelphia and had her first taste of what it might be like to live somewhere else. Alone, she walked under the tall trees and stately buildings of Chestnut Street. It was the first time she'd been in a neighborhood this nice, she says, so close to North Camden but so different. "I was like, oh my god," she laughs. "I felt like an ant."

The Philadelphia skyline is always there, hovering across the water. It shimmers on a hot day. Soria sometimes wonders: "What would my life be like if I didn't grow up here?"

Unexpected beauty

Soria is from North Camden, the roughest part of town. Back at the Beckett Street Garden, in South Camden, we're in Pedro's neighborhood, and the feeling is less post-war Dresden and more the fly-swatting listlessness of a hot almost-summer afternoon.

Rodriguez's place, a light-blue rowhouse, is across the street from his garden and his nine chickens. The building was abandoned when he moved in, so he slept on the third floor while he gutted it and made it livable again—"I brought it back to life," he says.

Photo by Kristin Moe.

The sounds are of distant cars, the groan of a lawnmower, birds. One empty lot features, unexpectedly, a miniature Christmas village on an enclosed platform, with tiny snow-covered houses. On a nearby block, someone has decorated the tree trunks with brightly colored butterflies.

An older couple hangs out in chairs next door, and some guys are sitting on a stoop farther up the block. Occasionally, a man will coast by on a bicycle, in no particular hurry. Rodriguez seems to know everyone, and they all return his greetings. A neighbor stops by and asks in Spanish whether Pedro has any extrapalitos, peach tree saplings. "'Ta bien, 'ta bien," they both say. OK.

Rodriguez takes me to his first garden, the one he and Devlin worked on during the Garden Club's first season, when he was just a few years out of high school. Sunflowers, the really tall kind, are just coming up along the perimeter, but there's nothing planted there yet. When the house next door was torn down last year, the demolition crews razed the garden and ruined the topsoil he'd spent 30 years improving. Now Rodriguez has to build it up again, starting from scratch.

Rodriguez grows his vegetables on borrowed land. He knows that if a landlord decided to build on the site he'd have to leave. "I wouldn't fight it," he says, because any development would be a sign of good things for Camden. Plus, he's got a short list of other towns that might welcome an enterprising gardener. "You always got to have a Plan B."

"Two separate worlds"

For most kids in Camden, however, leaving town isn't Plan B; it's Plan A. But Nohemi Soria is different; she's here to stay.

She's had a couple of advantages: She went to a creative arts high school, and had some good teachers. She went to college, studied abroad. She had parents—both migrant farmworkers—who instilled ambition in their kids early on. And she had the garden.

Nohemi Soria. Photo by Kristin Moe.

When she first came to work at the Camden Children's Garden at age 14, it was a revelation. It was a little like Chestnut Street in Philly, she says, an oasis of safety and peace—but only blocks from her house.

"It was two separate worlds," she says. We were seven minutes away from each other, but the difference was so drastic."

The garden was part of Soria's survival strategy. Being there, she says, has always been like hitting a pause button: so the bad stuff—the drugs, the crime, the violence—"doesn't take control of your life."

"I'm not sure you can save it anymore. But you can save people."

A lot of her classmates, she says, "didn't make it." If they were lucky, they found some positive influence—a teacher, an after-school program, a place where they could let their guard down and be kids. "But it was like living a double life." Back out on the sidewalk, their guard would come right back up.

Sometimes, she says, kids try to pretend they're not from Camden. "They say, oh, I'm from Pennsauken" or other nearby places. They don't want the stigma of being from Camden, of being thought of as "uneducated, rude, lazy, violent."

Soria and her boyfriend used to work birthday parties, making balloon animals. When potential clients heard they were from Camden, Soria says, their attitudes changed.

“They’re like ‘Oh, we’ll call you back’—but you knew.” They never called.

It’s a problem that’s reflected in the city’s media coverage. When the New JerseyCourier-Post asked readers their opinions of how Camden was portrayed, a resident named Joe Bennett said he didn’t appreciate news that was only about drugs, crime and violence and that it neglected some of the positive things about Camden. “Crime is not just in Camden,” Bennett commented on Facebook.

“It’s as though everybody from Camden are criminals,” Felix Moulier commented. “The image that is projected to readers outside of Camden instills a fear.”

And then there was the comment from George Bailey, a sentiment that may often go unspoken: “Maybe if you ignore Camden it’ll just go away.”

One Saturday at the Children’s Garden, Soria and I ran into Sonia Mixter Guzman, another Camden native who helped create the Goodness Project, which highlights work that’s being done by the city’s nonprofits. It’s trendy now for places like universities, towns, and cities to make “Happy” music videos that show people grooving to Pharell’s hit song. So the Goodness Project found a filmmaker to make a video for Camden, to show that “happy” exists here, too, just like anywhere else. Soria’s in it, wearing a crown of flowers.

Camden’s not a big place. But before she did the music video, she hadn’t met many other people, aside from gardeners, who were willing to invest in this city.

Seeing that she’s part of a bigger network of people who have all chosen to stay makes her bristle even more at the negative coverage. “It’s not just me—it’s a lot of us,” she says. “And we’re trying to do something.”

“A tenacious lot”

The day after this conversation was Mother’s Day. While Soria and her sisters were at a barbecue with their mom, Mike Devlin’s greenhouse was burglarized for the second time in six months. It took him three days to clean up the mess.

The hardest part, she says, is not knowing whether her commitment to this place will matter in the end.

I asked him if food had ever been stolen from the Beckett Street garden, and he says it has: someone once came in the night and pulled up a bunch of premature potato plants. It’s not surprising, he says, resignedly. “Conditions are getting worse.”

A few years ago, Soria’s mom moved out of the house with the drug dealers to a new place four blocks away where she thought it would be safer—but her new building, it turned out, was the center of one of the biggest drug trafficking rings in the city.

Soria has three younger sisters. The youngest, Diana, can tell you what to do if there's a shooting: drop down, or hide somewhere that's away from a window. "That's sad to me," Soria says. She wonders if Devlin is right, if maybe things are getting worse; she doesn't remember knowing that much at age six.

Rodriguez imagines what an alternative city might look like: a monorail, maybe. A city of the future. Gardens on green rooftops, instead of in empty lots. "Will I ever get to see that change in my neighborhood? Maybe 30 years from now." Politicians, he says, are to blame for not having the people's interests at heart. "Camden has such a bad rep. Who wants to invest in Camden?"

Instead, he talks about leaving, of traveling the world—Finland, maybe, or Ireland—and settling somewhere to build another garden. After 50 years, he says, "It's time to move on." His siblings all left Camden years ago. There's always a Plan B.

Pedro Rodriguez with several of his chickens. Photo by Kristin Moe.

Soria recently moved, too—but to Fairview, a nicer section of Camden. "I feel like I moved up in the world," she laughs. "It's so quiet." But back on York Street, her mother has built raised beds, and Diana already knows how to plant and weed. The Soria women decide together what to grow.

Staying put in Camden requires a certain grit—something the city's gardeners have in abundance.

Change, she knows, is a process. There is nothing in Camden's recent history to suggest that things will get better anytime soon. But—whether out of youth, stubborn optimism, or necessity—she has hope. Perhaps it's because she knows from experience that it's possible to grow up in Camden and still be OK.

"You don't like going out and having a bullet in your car—like, you know, you go through things like this that kind of leave you angry. Like—'Ah, I'm tired of it, I just want to leave.' But then you realize, well, I can't leave. Because if we left everything that was hard in life, then where would we end up?"

Devlin, the oldest of the three, seems tired. After so many decades of investing in this place, his hopes for Camden have been tempered by experience. "I'm not sure you can save it anymore," he says. "But you can save people."

He says that most of the kids who have come up through the garden's programs, like

Soria, have gone on to college. “I used to try and convince kids to get through school, get through college, get a trade, and then stay in Camden,” Devlin says. But he’s let go of that, little by little. “Right now it’s more like, get them on to a safe life rope, and let them go to another place,” he says. “I don’t try to talk them into staying.”

The hardest part, Soria says, is not knowing—not knowing whether her commitment to this place will matter in the end.

In the car, on her way back from the Beckett Street Garden, she gestures to the streets. “I’m not sugar-coating anything,” she says. “That is reality. But the part that’s beautiful is the resilience that children have, that families have, that people have. Growing up in this city, and still making some kind of life. That’s the part that’s beautiful.”

***

Last winter was the worst in recent memory. The hardy greens, herbs, and roots, everything that usually survives the winter, died—even Rodriguez’s bees froze to death. Spring planting was weeks behind. But by late May, when I talked to Soria over the phone, she was gushing: Beckett Street garden was going gangbusters. They had so much extra produce they hardly knew what to do with it, and Rodriguez’s two brand-new hives were humming industriously.

Sometimes resilience means surviving long enough to get out, to build something new somewhere else. But sometimes, it means staying put. In Camden, that requires a certain grit, something the city’s gardeners have in abundance. As Devlin says, “gardeners are a tenacious lot”—they work through rain, heat, and drought, hunkering down to weather each year’s winter, trusting that seeds will grow.

Correction: This article originally stated that Camden was across the Schuylkill River from Philadelphia. The river separating the two cities is the Delaware.