

## Sow Much Good by Rebecca Jeffery

Robin Emmons, founder of Sow Much Good. photo by: Piper Warlick

In 2008, after helping her troubled brother settle into a mental health facility, Robin Emmons witnessed his physical health decline due to a diet consisting mainly of canned and sugary foods because the center couldn't afford freshly grown produce.

Having just left corporate America after 20 years in the finance sector, Emmons grabbed her shovel and dug up her back yard to grow food for her brother and his fellow residents. His health rapidly improved and the mission for her next job was born: to use food as a vehicle to promote social justice on important issues such as food access in marginalized communities.

Emmons noticed that low-income neighborhoods lacked access to farmers markets and even to grocery stores. Affordable options for people mainly consisted of fast food and convenience stores. It is estimated that over 72,000 residents in Mecklenburg County live in food deserts or neighborhoods identified as "food insecure." People in these areas are more prone to obesity, cardiovascular disease and other chronic health conditions.

To expand her vision, Emmons launched the nonprofit Sow Much Good to heighten awareness about imbalances in the food system that eliminate the right of people in underserved communities access to pure, healthy food via farm stands, workshops and speaking engagements.

Today, Sow Much Good has a micro farm in Charlotte's northwest corridor at 3400 Sunset Road that grows affordable, chemical free produce for citizens living in urban food deserts. A broad range of seasonal produces is grown there and bee hives are on site to provide raw honey to customers. Fresh eggs and other staples are available as well at the Saturday market.

To date, Emmons has grown over 26,000 pounds of fresh produce for underserved communities in Charlotte. She makes her food as affordable as possible and accepts food stamps on all of her products, even seeds and seedlings so customers can grow their own food. She distributes recipes and invites them to free cooking demonstrations and classes,

empowering people to take control of their health.

Emmons' devotion and hard work have not gone unnoticed. She was nominated as one of the 10 CNN Heroes for 2013 for her diligence. Natural Awakenings spoke with her about her ongoing commitment to serving those in need.

You have done so much to bring nourishment to those living in food deserts in Charlotte, but there are still many that don't have access to fresh, affordable food. In what ways do you think the local community and City of Charlotte can better make these provisions happen?

If the City of Charlotte and the larger community are interested in eliminating the issue of food deserts, there are many things that could be done to accomplish that goal. Just one example would be a different approach to our currently restrictive zoning and land use policies. Many of those policies have not kept pace with the current times nor the growing movement around food and opportunities for local economic development.

Currently what we have are vast, open areas left vacant by retail flight and depressed building lots in affected neighborhoods. Those vacant and desolate lots serve as not only an eyesore in poor and underserved communities, but also as an advertisement of space available for illicit and often illegal activity to take place, causing further harm to already fragile communities and our city as a whole. That one step of revisiting and repurposing some of our existing land use and zoning policies for the use of agricultural production in affected communities, could arguably, in fact serve purposes well beyond that of simply alleviating food desert conditions. Nourishment is a multifaceted affair when it comes to communities.

Volunteers seem to be the backbone of Sow Much Good. How can Charlotteans help you on your mission and what are some real needs at this time for your organization?

Volunteers indeed are the engine of our work. As we plan to serve more people in our city in this and in future years, we need a consistent pipeline of volunteers to expand our impact and to increase our reach. Volunteers can get involved in many ways. Some examples are: volunteering for regular planting and site maintenance activities happening now at one or more of our five markets during the week at Sunset Road and offsite locations beginning on April 12, delivering CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) boxes to homes in the communities we serve or at alternate drop off locations as of June 15, or serving on a committee of the board for programing, events, and other critical areas of the organization. To be sure, we can absolutely marry volunteer interests with an existing and ongoing need.

As a fast food nation, many people lack the understanding of what "food" really is and many diseases are caused by poor eating habits. In what ways do you educate underserved communities on the power of clean eating and healthy nutrition?

First and foremost we model the behaviors in our own lives and then in our work not just through the whole foods we offer to the community but also by hosting free events such as raw food tastings, cooking demos, canning classes, nutrition education lectures, films on the farms series related to food and many other programs to increase the knowledge and understanding of our community on the power of food.

You've worked so hard to establish Sow Much Good and have received a great deal of publicity and recognition. What are your short and long term goals for the future?

The recognition we've received to date has been very helpful in creating opportunities for the organization to reach short and long term goals. In that order, our short term goal focus is on expanding the current model we've created here in Charlotte to create self-sufficiency in underserved communities, diminishing and ultimately eliminating the issue of food insecurity and related health disparities in neighborhoods without access to real food options.

Long term, as we know the conditions that exist here are not unique to Charlotte, we are currently in discussions with local governments, businesses and community stakeholders in other states interested in our work and our model. To that end, expanding our work to a national and perhaps even global platform is absolutely in our future plans.

How did it feel to be nominated for CNN's Hero of the Year? We are so proud of you!

Thank you so much! It is an amazing honor. I feel extremely proud to represent our region and state on a global platform that continues to bring support for our work along with much attention to the thriving local foods movement taking place in Charlotte and the region.

Sow Much Good's story indicates that anyone and everyone can do something to address problems in our community that may seem intractable. To be clear, the thing that seems small can, in fact, make a huge difference. Just imagine what our city could be like if we all volunteer, serve, give and tell a friend to do the same. Just food for thought...