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For a Healthier Bronx, a Farm of Their Own



Stewart Cairns for The New York Times
Chris Riger, left, and Rebecca Radliff mulching at the farm.

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IT'S hard to imagine two places in New York State more different than the South Bronx and Schoharie County.

The South Bronx has 31,582 people per square mile. The county has 51.

Less than 2 percent of the people who live in the South Bronx are white. Schoharie County, about three hours straight north by car, is 95 percent white.

The South Bronx is home to four jails, two sewage plants and an untold number of subway rats. Schoharie County has 13,600 cows, 1,305 sheep, 291 hogs and several hundred farmers to tend those animals and grow vegetables and fruit.

Dennis Derryck, a 70-year-old mathematician and professor at the [New School](#) for Management and Urban Policy, has become the unlikely matchmaker between the two worlds.

Mr. Derryck, who lives in Harlem, is Schoharie County's newest farmer. His spread is Corbin Hills Road Farm, 92 acres with a pretty farmhouse and a silo that needs a roof.



It's the cornerstone of a project linking the upstate rural and downstate urban through beets and berries, an effort to get healthy food into what is the poorest Congressional district east of the Mississippi.

Unlike others who have come to the South Bronx to solve social problems through vegetables, he is offering neither charity nor an outsider's idea of what the neighborhood might want to cook. He's developed a commercial community-supported agriculture plan (C.S.A.) that lets residents determine what they'll get, with an enticing prize at the end for people who stick with it: a chance to own shares in the farm.

He started the project because, like others who have spent time looking at what people eat in the South Bronx, he became frustrated.



“If there is a food revolution, it's not yet including the low income,” Mr. Derryck said. Every day, hundreds of thousands of pounds of produce travel through the South Bronx to the Hunts Point market, one of the world's largest food distribution centers. Little of it is actually sold in the surrounding neighborhood.

The South Bronx has more health problems than any other part of New York, according to studies by the city health department. Many, like [diabetes](#) and [obesity](#), are connected to [diet](#). Mr. Derryck thought a community supported agriculture program rooted in the actual community could help.

Marcus Yam/The New York Times

Upstate herbs, bundled for a trip to the South Bronx.

In a traditional C.S.A. plan, people pay farmers at the beginning of a season for weekly deliveries of whatever grows on the farm. Last year, 18,000 New Yorkers participated in 80 such plans, according to the advocacy group Just Food. It's a model that doesn't translate well to poor neighborhoods, where handing over, say, \$500 at one time with the promise that someone will send you a box of flowers, herbs and vegetables you probably don't want isn't a popular notion.

So he decided to turn the model on its head, giving plan members a say in what is grown, and, with the help of nonprofit groups, making it less expensive as well.



“Most people I talked with say, ‘Can I get enough food to feed my family,’ ” Mr. Derryck said. “They don’t want parsnips and thyme. They want 10 pounds of potatoes.”

He cajoled almost every person he has ever served with on a nonprofit board, raising \$562,000. He also got a \$300,000 bank loan. He bought the farm in February 2009, then went shopping for a farm manager, a tractor and a refrigerated truck for delivery in the Bronx. Once he pays off investors and the loan, which might take five years or more, he intends to pass shares in the farm to the members of the plan.

Mr. Derryck’s farm won’t be producing until August. And even then, it can’t grow enough to fill the boxes. So a small group of Schoharie County farmers have signed on, agreeing to offer vegetables and fruit at a discount to help Mr. Derryck make budget. Mr. Derryck thinks the plan can eventually generate \$1.2 million a year for Schoharie County farmers, and expand its roster of supporters to include [foster-care](#) families and day care centers.

Richard Ball, who grows some of the finest carrots in the state as well as cardoons and haricots verts for restaurants like Daniel and Per Se, met with Mr. Derryck and decided the crazy professor from Harlem had a cause worth supporting. He also figured it could build business and upstate-downstate good will.

“If we simply got New York to be New York’s customer, we’d be in great shape,” he said.

Seven nonprofit groups in the South Bronx have signed on as sponsors, passing on shares to employees and clients, others offering some financial help and still others serving as the collection and distribution points. The first week, Mr. Derryck sold 171 shares. This week, it reached 228.

“Clearly, we have struck a nerve,” Mr. Derryck said.

People can pay \$3.75 to \$20 a week, depending on income, subsidies and share size. Members only have to pay for two weeks’ supply of food at a time, and they can use food stamps.



Marcus Yam/The New York Times
Dennis Derryck sorting herbs.

Judith Raphael signed up right away. She has spent the last seven years raising two children in the neighborhood and each summer hosts the Taking Back the Bad Rap of Hunts Point celebration.



Despite what critics who have never lived in the South Bronx might think, people really do want to eat fresh fruit and vegetables, she said. But the options are slim. At the bodega, you might find spotty bananas and potatoes. At the only grocery store within walking distance, the broccoli is usually yellowing, the apples soft and the lettuce packaged.

And it's not cheap.

“By the time you bought everything you need for the household, you get to the vegetables and you just say forget it, you can't afford it,” she said. “People might not buy a bag of oranges because it's too expensive, but that doesn't mean they don't want to cook a good dinner.”



The boxes that showed up Thursday held such beautiful food that people couldn't stop smiling.

There were pantry fillers like red potatoes, turnips and beets. But there was also plenty of pristine chard, crisp sugar snap peas and fresh oregano. And even though strawberries were too expensive for Mr. Derryck's initial budget, each family got a box — the farmers' gift to their new urban partners. “Right off the bat you want them to think they are making a right decision,” Mr. Ball said.

Marcus Yam/The New York Times
Dawn Burley in the Bronx.

But all that glowing good will doesn't mean the project is going to work. Life in the South Bronx just isn't that easy, and people are skeptical. Many groups have parachuted in trying to fix things, using fashionable terms like food deserts and food justice.

The city-run Green Carts program, which has issued permits for 113 produce carts in the Bronx, rarely shows up in Hunts Point, residents say. And City Harvest comes by every few weeks to hand out about 20,000 pounds of fruit and vegetables, bringing along chefs like [Eric Ripert](#) to demonstrate how to cook vegetable fried rice.

Even Heather Mills, the former wife of [Paul McCartney](#), sends her brand of nutrition into Hunts Point. In 2008, she donated \$1 million to the Hunts Point Alliance for Children for fresh produce, and provides frozen [vegan](#) imitation chicken, fish and hamburgers from



her food company, Meatless Meats. She is also donating money to the Corbin Hills Road Farm project.

But not everyone in the South Bronx is enamored with programs that aren't home grown.

“It’s been like this hippie approach to food justice that starts to have this hand-out mentality,” said Zena Nelson, who started the South Bronx Food Co-op in 2007. The co-op, which Ms. Nelson recently left, has agreed to buy 25 shares of the Schoharie C.S.A. plan to provide food for its members.

She empathizes with Mr. Derryck, who has to juggle the demands of his agricultural enterprise as well as the competing dietary interests of a community with roots in West Africa, the Caribbean, the American South and Latin America.

“This community is going to be a tough one,” Mr. Derryck said. “If I blow it, I’m not getting a second chance.”

That’s why he thinks the project will sustain itself only if residents have an ownership stake. Once plan members take control of the farm, they can collectively decide to use their shares to reduce the price of their weekly take, and make other decisions about how the farm is run and what’s grown. He envisions farm camps and weekend visits.

But it’s a concept that can confuse supporters and plan members alike.

“I don’t even know what they are talking about,” said Juan Duncan, an immigrant from the Dominican Republic who has been unemployed since March. Still, when he saw a flier outlining the concept, he enrolled. He’s sick and tired of grocery store prices. “Five or six dollars for a little bunch of asparagus with a rubber band around it?” he asked incredulously.



Marcus Yam/The New York Times
Shareholders in the food project in the South Bronx.

That the plan did not offer plantains was his only regret. “But I understand why,” he said.

Nancy Biberman has been working with people in the South Bronx for nearly three decades. She is the founder and president of the Women’s Housing and Economic Development Project, one of the biggest partners in Mr. Derryck’s project.



“If you don’t understand what ownership of anything other than a television or a cellphone is, the notion of being a shareholder in a cooperative farm is a hard concept to understand,” she said. But at this point, anything that gets good food into the South Bronx is worth a try.

“You know how you throw the spaghetti against the wall and see what sticks?” she said. “We’ll throw all the vegetables against the wall and see what happens. The problems are so serious, it’s kind of unconscionable to not try everything.”