



ABOUT GRAVY

A publication of the Southern Foodways Alliance, a member-supported institute of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi. Visit www.southernfoodways.org.

Editor:

Sara Camp Arnold
gravy.sfa@gmail.com



TABLE OF CONTENTS

- ▶ PAGE 1
Meet Calvin Head
Mary Margaret Miller
- ▶ PAGE 4
Who's in the Kitchen?
Ashley Hall
- ▶ PAGE 8
Geechee Girl: An Interview with
Valerie Erwin
Sara Camp Arnold
- ▶ PAGE 12
Honeybee, Won't You Be My Bakery
Lisa Howorth
- ▶ PAGE 14
Chingo Bling: "The Masa
Messiah"
Robb Walsh

MEET CALVIN HEAD: Agricultural Activist and John Egerton Prize Winner Enriching a Delta community "from the inside out"

by Mary Margaret Miller

CALVIN HEAD, winner of the SFA's 2010 John Egerton Prize, steps into the driver's seat of a white passenger van. Director and founder of the West Holmes Community Development Organization (WHCDO), Head takes me on a tour of Holmes County, in the Delta region of Mississippi, where twelve African American-owned vegetable farms participate in the WHCDO farm initiative.

Yesterday, Head signed off on a federal housing grant. Tomorrow, he will lead a meeting of the community water board. Since 1996, he has been piloting an effort to bring food, jobs, education, housing, and hope to fourteen unincorporated villages here in Holmes County.

"Holmes County has the highest retention of minority-owned land in the country," Head says as he turns the key. But in the late 1990s, new generations of Holmes County residents were not interested in agriculture as their forefathers had been. They began to rent their land to the large landowners in the area as a way to make a profit.

In an effort to reorganize the cooperative, Head took on the task of showing locals that the biggest resource they could leverage for financial stability was their legacy of land stewardship.

“The vegetable-gardening initiative is the nucleus of the process,” says Head. “It is how we generate a lot of our resources, and it is where we want to go in the future in terms of wealth creation—to have a place here in the western part of the county that we can bring fresh produce to, and distribute to different entities and industries within and surrounding this county.”

WHCDO’s biggest market for fresh produce is the WIC Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program. The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children—generally known as WIC—provides food at no cost to low-income mothers and children.

The first year we started, about five or six years ago, they didn’t want to eat the greens and squash and sweet potatoes. But now they have come around...



Head explains that Holmes County has the highest voucher-redemption rate in the state for the Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program. “The first year we started, about five or six years ago, they didn’t want to eat the greens and squash and sweet potatoes,” remembers Head. “But now they have come around, and I have noticed that they are buying more peas and more greens and more sweet potatoes and more corn and more tomatoes. Even the younger generation is understanding that the fast-food industry is not the way to go all the time.”

Demetrus Rowe, a forty-year-old WHCDO vegetable farmer, met Head in 2004. Head encouraged Rowe to register with the Department of Agriculture’s WIC program. “Everyone around me was farming and really happy about it,” says Rowe. “It was lucrative. And watching other people around you grow things makes you want to grow, too.”

“A lot of what people are eating in the community is being raised by us,” Rowe explains. “We want to make people more aware of what is good for them and what is harmful. I’ve seen people changing the way they eat.”

The WHCDO has also implemented a youth farming and business program. Over twenty young people, roughly between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five, rise early to help the farmers in their fields, or meet after a morning of labor to distribute the day’s harvest.

A youth mentor works with the new participants to train them in harvesting, market distribution, and pricing techniques. “The young people provide a labor force for the farmers, who are used to equipment doing all the work,” says Head.

The biggest obstacle now facing the WHCDO is getting their storage facility outfitted with a commercial refrigerator. According to Head, such a storage facility will allow the WHCDO to supply larger markets and encourage other farmers to join the vegetable-gardening initiative.

As he drives back to the WHCDO office, Head’s cell phone continues to ring, almost incessantly. His optimism remains high despite the challenges he faces: a hot, dry summer harvest with fall planting on the horizon, and keeping the momentum of the program high while seeking ways to pay the youth workers and supplement the farmers.

Head steps out of the van. He looks across the small garden by the WHCDO office and lists the benefits that the vegetable-growing program has already put into action:

“We are able to show people the advantages of eating healthy, locally grown produce versus what we are eating that comes from other places. We are trying to grow the community from the inside out by using the resources we have in the community to benefit the people in the community.”

Mary Margaret Miller is a native of Sunflower County, Mississippi, where as a girl she planted a whiskey-barrel garden every spring. Today, she works as Heritage Director for the Mississippi Arts Commission.