

HARVESTING RICHES

The Road to Pembroke

BY AMELIA LEVIN

It's easy to drive right past Iyabo and some of the other farms in the Pembroke Farming Family, hidden among massive cornfields in Kankakee County south of Chicago.

But take a sharp left turn off Illinois Route 17 and you'll suddenly find yourself on a gravel road that seems to lead nowhere. To the right and left, a few boarded up shacks sit lonely among abandoned, rusted out cars. Then there are some trailers and small homes, most of their front lawns littered with trinkets, car parts, worn down swing sets and plain old stuff that has collected over decades.

This is Hopkins Park, and nearby Pembroke looks about the same. The area has been called one of the most impoverished areas in the country.

Johari Cole-Kweli, owner of Iyabo Farms along with her husband of 20 years, Sharadi, smiles slightly when she reflects on the media's claim. "That's sort of a misconception," she says, referring to the impoverishment of Pembroke.

Look past the trinkets that populate the lawns and you'll see what she means. Kneel down among the rows of planted vegetables and herbs on her 45-acre, all-organic farm, and you'll see plump red tomatoes and others ripening, strung out on a long, twisted vine. Green and purple-colored lettuces flutter in the breeze that blows across the land. Big, round beets poke through the earth. We pick big, yellow green beans and take a bite. They're sweet, and sure to be delicious when sautéed with some butter and herbs.

It's quiet, save for the occasional clucking from the chickens and ducks running around, and from the heritage turkeys that look like they came straight off the Mayflower. In a small pen at the edge of the farming area, Cover Girl and Freedom, the two donated, former milking goats, as well as Cowboy, the male goat, graze on grass. Almond Joy, the horse, and Mr. Bingo-Murphy, the mini horse, hang out nearby. Overhead, a hawk circles, and the clouds seem so close you could touch them. When you drive by, neighbors wave to you, even if you're a stranger.

Things are peaceful here.



"Our riches come from the land, from the earth," Cole-Kweli says. "Once you have land you can write your own ticket; you can grow your own food and survive as opposed to living in an apartment where you're subjected to whatever comes your way. With land, you can stretch out and have more control over your food source and other things. We can grow cotton to make clothes, and I can even raise sheep for wool if I had to. We have everything we need, right here."

What does one really need? Cool cars? Fancy clothes? Huge houses? These things suddenly seem so trivial when you're standing on fertile ground, literally picking your lunch and harvesting your dinner. In a few acres of space, Kweli and her family have all of these things at their fingertips. It's hard work, but they truly reap what they sow.

Today, Cole-Kweli and her intern, Nadir Bilal, are harvesting the last of the heirloom tomatoes for the farmers market the next day at Seaway National Bank's headquarters on the south side of Chicago. At one point Cole-Kweli bites into a

ripe red one, slurping up the juices as they pour out.

Iyabo Farm also supplies produce and processed chickens and turkeys to other farmers markets in Kankakee County, including one at the Pembroke Village Hall as well as Country Club Hills, and the Austin and Englewood neighborhoods on the west and south sides of Chicago.

"Right now we have offers for 19 different markets," Cole-Kweli says. "But we can't be everywhere so we've selected markets based on past customers and need." In addition, Flavor, a fusion-Southern cuisine restaurant in Flossmoor, purchases the goods.

Iyabo belongs to the Pembroke Farming Family, a farming organization made up of about 20 different farms in the Pembroke/Hopkins Park area. The farms work together, combining their goods to maximize their presence at multiple markets.

"A farming organization is different than a cooperative," Cole-Kweli explains. "A cooperative is a little more commercial, where

Photo by Ann Flood

“Our riches come from the land, from the earth. Once you have land you can write your own ticket; you can grow your own food and survive... we have everything we need, right here.”

everyone pools their financial resources. They tend to be more established. In a farming organization, we all help each other out, learn from each other.”

In addition, Cole-Kweli continues to supply the Pembroke Farmers Cooperative which will sell products for her, particularly her free-range chickens, always in high demand. And, Iyabo is part of the University of Illinois Extension, an outreach program providing education on sustainable, profitable food production and other resources for farmers.

But the most outside financial help that the Pembroke Farming Family receives comes from Heifer International, a non-profit organization that raises money for farmers, with a focus on providing livestock training.

“We wanted some turkeys so we contacted them,” Cole-Kweli says. The wild Narragansett and bourbon red turkeys they received are more flavorful than traditional, store-bought turkeys, in Cole-Kweli’s opinion. They also have a longer raising period, of four to five months. Running around the farm, they look like the fuzzy birds children make paintings of during Thanksgiving.

Cole-Kweli also has up to 200 free range chickens at a time that run about the farm and don’t seem at all bothered by people. In fact, they’ll come right up to you, “looking for attention,” she says.

The turkeys and chickens are processed into meat by an organic, Amish farm in Author, IL. “The ducks I process myself,” Cole-Kweli says with a slight grimace. “You think you get used to it, but you really don’t,” she adds with a smile.

The Cole-Kwelis now have eggs, since they received some laying chickens, so they don’t have to buy them from the farmer down the road anymore. Those they don’t eat they raise in a brooder that sits outside the greenhouse. “You have to have it at the perfect temperature,” she says.

With all the animals running about, Iyabo seems like a petting zoo. It’s no wonder, then, that on weekdays during the harvest months the farm can be packed with children and other people visiting as part of school tours or just coming “to hang out,” Cole-Kweli says.

Together, the farmers in the Pembroke Farming Family organization also host tours, workshops at schools and colleges, and engage in other social outreach to provide education about farming. “The goal was to align in order to raise awareness about sustainable farming, especially among African-Americans,” Cole-Kweli says.

Cole-Kweli’s farm first got attention about

eight years ago when she hosted a Marcus Garvey festival during the summer, when the crops are at their peak. “One of the reasons we started the festival was because our children did not have enough African-American heroes to celebrate during the summer months, what with Martin Luther King Day in the winter and Kwanza,” Cole-Kweli says. “During the summer we could also mix the day with learning about farming. Marcus Garvey seemed like a good person to name the festival after because his philosophy was getting back to the land, making a connection with nature.”

Cole-Kweli’s neighbors, Fred and Jifunza Carter, whose farm backs up to Iyabo, started the Black Oaks Center for Sustainable Living to further educate schoolchildren and others curious about sustainable farming and growing one’s own food. Black Oak stands for the rare trees that populate the Pembroke area.

In fact, the Black Oak Savannahs are among a multitude of plant life in this area that has remained untouched since the glacial ages, Cole-Kweli says. “Elsewhere in Illinois, you really don’t have the original farmland left as you do in Pembroke,” she says. “This is an area that needs to be protected. There is a lot of wildlife diversity, amphibians, plants, birds, and other life.”

Back in the greenhouse, there’s even more for schoolchildren and other curious visitors to learn when they visit Iyabo Farms. God’s Gang, a non-profit organization in Chicago donated three, blue, plastic barrels for an aquaculture system in which the Cole-Kwelis raised tilapia. “We had to get certification to raise them because they are an invasive creature,” Cole-Kweli says.

Then, water from the barrels gets pumped into a hydroponic



system, basically a two-tiered shelf holding pond plants on top and herbs and fruit plants on the bottom. Fish waste in the water from the barrels acts as a fertilizer for the pond plants, then the water gets filtered back out as fresh water to feed melons, cucumbers and herbs on the lower level.

Opposite the hydroponic system, a bin holds soil and worms which help make the soil more fertile. Cole-Kweli says she uses the water drained from the bins as a nutrient-rich source of food for other plants in her gardens and farm.

The latest project on Iyabo Farms is building another greenhouse, one that won't require as much fossil fuel to keep warm during the winters. Cole-Kweli plans to accomplish this by insulating the walls with layers of old, rubber tires and clay. In addition, they'll surround the greenhouse with beds of compost, which can heat up to 140 degrees from decomposition activity.

The composting bin sits just in front of the old greenhouse with see-through plastic walls so visitors can observe the process of food and other natural materials breaking down into what will become soil fertilizer. And, the Cole-Kwelis have added an outhouse where they collect human waste and let it break down outside under layers of sawdust before it can be safely used to fertilize the farm.

The thought is not the most appetizing, to say the least, but Cole-Kweli assures that the pounds upon pound of sawdust they dump on the waste helps with the smell. "It does not stink." We'll take her word for it.

"I've always been into science so this peaks my interest," says Cole-Kweli, a Michigan State University grad with a degree in microbiology.

Cole-Kweli seems completely in her element on the farm, and perhaps this is because growing up she divided time between living with her grandmother on farms in Michigan and her parents on the south side of Chicago. "We chose Pembroke as a place to do farming because it is so close to Chicago," Cole-Kweli says. We came down here just over ten years ago with a friend who lived here and I fell in love with the area. I found myself coming back. We were already looking for land in different places, but this was just the right fit."

Former vegans, the Cole-Kwelis originally owned a small grocery store selling organic and vegan foods in Chicago, back before Whole Foods even existed in the city, she says. At that time there wasn't as much interest as there is now in that way of eating. "We were vegetarians looking for fresh produce and we realized we were living in a desert in the city in terms of getting that kind of food. Back then, many people, especially African Americans, didn't know what the term organic meant."

"I can't stand green beans out of a can because I was never raised on it. There's nothing like eating a fresh tomato or a watermelon that's fully rip-

ened, and not picked so early so all the nutrients come out of it."

What they plant depends on what the family wants to eat, unless they're sick of something, like eggplants, for example. That "was a little oversaturated last year," she says.

"Every year I think I'll plant less, take a break. But who am I kidding, I'm not going to stop planting."

And why stop, when every tomato, every waxy green bean goes to feed herself, her family and others. For centuries, there have been farmers like Johari Cole-Kweli, and perhaps for centuries, they have been undervalued. Now, thanks to the latest obsession with all things sustainable and "green," it seems like finally, we've begun to realize their importance. With food costs rising, a struggling economy, and other economic hardships we endure, in some ways, farmers might just be better off than the rest of us. Instead of relying on corporate bureaucracies, stocks and bonds, they harvest their own wealth, their own success with every seed, every sow. ♡

Amelia Levin is a freelance food/dining writer and editor based in Chicago with training in hard news reporting and business journalism. Currently, Amelia is attending culinary classes at night to hone her cooking skills. Outside of work and class, she enjoys all things epicurean and frequents the Green City Market as often as time allows her.

Johari Cole-Kewli's Family Farm is part of the Pembroke Farmers Cooperative in Kankakee County and about 60 miles south of Chicago. Farmer members are largely African-American, and all use chemical-free growing methods. Some are certified organic farms. The co-op produces free-range chickens, vegetables, grains, beef, lamb and goats. To learn more about Pembroke and where to find their products, call 815-944-9947.

