

TO RAISE A CHILD IN RICHMOND, IT TAKES A FARM

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MATTHEW GREEN

If you eat food, then you're a farmer. Period.

That's the message Shyaam Shabaka, the effervescent 66-year-old founder of Eco Village Farm Center, tries to convey to those who visit his small farm on the outskirts of Richmond.

Shabaka sees that many of today's urban youth are drastically removed from real food and where it comes from. "Their parents don't know how to cook; they grew up eating fast food. We all eat, so we ought to have a closer relationship with our food, where it comes from, and how to grow it."

It's a refrain we hear often, but five years ago, at the youthful age of 61, Shabaka decided to do something about it. The result is Eco Village, a community environmental education project that occupies a 5.6-acre plot of land on the Richmond-El Sobrante border in Contra Costa County. A stone's throw from I-80, the farm is a hidden oasis of green, filled with fruit trees, ripe tomatoes, wooded creeks, and the cacophony of squawking chickens. The distant buzz of traffic is the only evidence of the concrete landscape just beyond the trees.

Shabaka's nonprofit organization, partly supported by Earth Island Institute and the Trust for Public Land, has slowly acquired the property and is in the constant process of clearing arable land to expand its farming operations. A good deal of recent attention

has been given to a large open field on the property's periphery, where rows of summer squash, Tokyo turnips, cucumbers, corn, and pumpkins happily bask in unobstructed sunlight. On the far side of the field, where there are plans to erect a windmill, a wooded trail leads down to a confluence of creeks. This is where Shabaka gives his young visitors a basic lesson in watersheds and ecology.

In the main field, shadowed by a large teepee, are the animals—always a crowd-pleaser. The cast includes a flock of chickens, several rabbits, six sheep, four goats, one pot-bellied pig, and an undetermined number of bees. Across the field, near the vermiculature compost pile and small orchard of fruit trees, a greenhouse is being constructed. Nearby, in the small orchard, apricots, apples, and pears await harvest.

The project is geared specifically toward youth in the inner-city communities of Contra Costa County. School and youth groups regularly visit the farm, where they can participate in everything from sheep shearing to honey harvesting. Eco Village currently works with students in 20 different schools in the area, including youths with severe learning disabilities and others who have been recently incarcerated or who live in foster homes. Participants, sometimes including family members, learn about farming, cooking, and animal husbandry.

The project also brings its produce to schools and participates in a small Wednesday farmers' market in front of Richmond's Kaiser Permanente. While a CSA is in the works, Eco Village currently delivers produce to liquor stores at a discounted rate and encourages owners to add it to their inventory of sodas, processed food, and alcohol. If good food is made available, Shabaka insists, people will eat it. The goal, he says, is to get people in urban areas, particularly youth and their families, to take better care of themselves and their communities.

By all accounts, Richmond is a rough town. In view of the green hills of Marin, the northeastern Bay Area city of just over 100,000 is home to the Chevron refinery, which regularly spews toxins into the air over a community known to have more than its share of health problems. Richmond's mayor, Gayle McLaughlin (who in 2006 gained the distinction of being the first Green



Shyaam Shabaka gives his goats an afternoon treat.

Party mayor elected in California), has her hands full in this community where an abundance of liquor stores and a severe lack of nutritious food sources contributes to a glut of nutrition-related illnesses.

Despite its small size, Richmond suffers from big-city rates of violence and poverty. Statistically ranked one of the most dangerous cities in the country, Richmond had 40 homicides in 2006. In the previous year, the violence escalated so quickly that the city council declared a state of emergency.

Many of Eco Village's participants come from the bloodiest areas of the city, including the notorious Iron Triangle and the unincorporated area of North Richmond. That a vibrant green space can exist within their city's limits is the bigger surprise for them.

"This project kind of serves as neutral ground," says Shabaka, a Richmond resident. It's no one's turf, it's like an oasis." The environmental education approach is a kind of therapy, he adds, a way to get them in nature and off the streets they know too well. "When they go back to [the streets], they see it through different lenses."

Shabaka served in the Peace Corps in Nigeria before beginning a 30-year career in public health. He worked for the city of Berkeley in the 1990s, specifically with low-income residents suffering from AIDS, drug abuse, and nutrition-related illnesses. He noticed that many of his patients' children and families fell into a cycle of criminal behavior. It was then that Shabaka began his involvement with urban community gardens, finding it to be an effective way to help youth improve their diets and keep off the streets.

Unlike many of the other food justice and environmental education programs in the Bay Area that serve low-income youth of color, Eco Village is run by a middle-aged black man, a fact Shabaka is all too aware of.

"There needs to be more black farmers," he says, noting the striking numbers of blacks over the last half century who have fled the fields in search of urban employment. "When youth see people like them doing it, it resonates."

Raised in rural Arkansas during the Jim Crow era, Shabaka was one of 10 kids. When his father, a plumber by trade, couldn't get good work because of his skin color, Shabaka helped him toil in the fields of their small tract farm. Mired in poverty, the family fell deep into debt.

"When we left Arkansas, we owed everyone in town," he says. "When I left there, I didn't want to have to do anything associated with farming again." Farming was something you did when you couldn't do anything else, the lowest rung, he notes. Just the notion conjured the cotton fields of the deep South and embodied all the venom of racism, slavery, exploitation, and poverty. That stigma, he adds, still strongly exists today among many of the youth of color he meets. It's a powerful force that distances them from the source of their food and the beauty of growing it and eating well.

"I tell them, 'that wasn't farming [or] being involved in growing your own food,'" he says. "Don't let that history shape your present-day experience."

It's been a hot, exhausting summer day and Shabaka eagerly slumps into a lawn chair in the precious shade of his garden. It's an all-too-rare moment of down time for a man with a mission.

"I'm just glad to be sitting down," he says, mopping the sweat from his forehead.

Shabaka has just returned from leading a community youth workshop in North Richmond, an area he refers to as "ground zero." A 14-year-old boy was gunned down on the street that afternoon. The murder will go unnoticed, Shabaka insists. He shakes his head in silence for a short moment.

"We can't afford the luxury of just growing healthy food. My job would be much easier if that was the case," he says, noting that if the boy who was shot had ever tried an heirloom tomato, he'd still be dead today. Having school gardens is great, he adds, but it's not enough if you don't also address all the other issues that kids are dealing with on the streets every day. Which is why, he says, much of his energy is not directly focused on just food, but also on community-building, violence prevention, and a range of other approaches that attempt to address the plethora of problems that engulf his community.

"We're involved in growing food," says Shabaka. "But having healthy people and communities is our end product. Food is a link in the chain . . . It's a means to that end." 🍌

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