



BARTRAM'S GARDEN

Statement on Community Food Sovereignty

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Submitted for the record to Congresswoman Mary Gay Scanlon | June 18, 2021

My name is Chris Bolden-Newsome, son of farmers Rufus and Demalda Newsome. I am a fourth-generation free farmer from the Mississippi Delta. I am the Co-Director and farm manager at Sankofa Community Farm at Bartram's Garden, where the farm team and I run a 3-acre urban farm serving the lower Kingsessing area in Southwest Philadelphia. We have worked for a decade in a unique partnership on the land with historic Bartram's Garden in reparative community healing.

Sankofa is a spiritually rooted farm honoring the wisdom and spiritual practices of our ancestors through prayer, song, and hands-on, in-field education. In practice we follow the principles of Natural Agriculture, which centralizes cultivation techniques that promote soil health by working the land with hand tools—there has been no tilling here for 7 years—and avoiding as much as possible the introduction of any chemical or even outside organic inputs. We build healthy soil in order to grow life-giving foods.

We believe that similar to our farming practices, nurturing a strong foundation amongst our neighbors is the key to growing the best in our community. The majority of our neighbors, like myself, immigrated from Southern Black communities or from Africa, the Caribbean, and Southeast Asia, where strong interpersonal connections linked by shared traditions were a given and helped us to overcome daily struggles.

For our majority African American neighbors, the trauma of generational, systemic white supremacy; segregation; redlining; and food apartheid¹ are addressed in small but powerful ways when our neighbors—especially our elders—can form links to their shared stories through the seeds, plants, and produce of their homelands. Full-service grocery stores in our area of Southwest are not in easy walking distance for many, and when they are, they do not offer the products that our farm grows. Most stores here carry marked-up, low-quality produce—if any—and are filled with cheap, unhealthy food options. This situation, coupled with low culinary education amongst many young families and restricted budgets, creates the recipe for diabetes, hypertension, and worse that plague low-wealth sections of Philadelphia.

However, the problem of ill health in Southwest Philly is deeper than just access. Sankofa Community Farm offers a route to healing our community's problems of poverty-induced violence, illness, and disconnection through involving our neighbors in interdependent networks where we support one another through our food system. Through our weekly farmstands, 60-bed community garden, food

¹ Detroit educator and activist Malik Yakini defines "food apartheid" as neighborhoods where "public policy and economic practices have created [this area with] low access to foods." Yakini, Malik. "Food Desert: A Problematic Term." T. Colin Campbell Center for Nutrition Studies (December 2020).

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education classes, paid youth farmer intern program, and supporting multiple independent business initiatives of Black and Brown young adults, we are going beyond food security to build community self-reliance and community food sovereignty.

At Sankofa Community Farm, we emphasize intergenerational learning, which recognizes that young people are our developing leaders. Our respected community elders share their learning to develop the talents of youth to serve their community.

The COVID19 pandemic has seen a flood of food aid from government and non-profit sources to poorer communities like Southwest Philadelphia. This came with the best intentions, but sadly little will change in the total health profile of our community. Much of the food given out was often of the same artificially flavored, low-quality types offered in the local grocers, and most importantly, much of it was not familiar to our neighbors and came with no cooking instructions. I have seen many, many boxes of commodity foods left in the sun to rot: not because folks didn't need food but because, in part, many young families didn't know how to prepare it.

Food sovereignty entails the work of rematriating food traditions by teaching folks to again recognize the food they came up on and how to prepare it in new and healthful ways.

Food sovereignty is concerned with not just providing the calories and nutrients folks need but helping to build webs of connection to one another by our relationship to the land we live on, the foods we know ancestrally, and the life choices made available on our blocks.

Food given to folks without jobs, without education, and without power to determine their neighborhood's future does not nourish. We at Sankofa hope that local and national leaders can listen deeply to our community's needs and bravely go beyond the typical institutional solutions to support communities healing themselves with the tools we already have but are quickly losing with the death of every elder. Make land cheaper and more available, open up pathways to affordable housing, promote meaningful jobs that pay a living wage, and let communities do the rest with the knowledge they already have.

Thank you for your time and many blessings to you all.