

Plantation Park Heights Urban Farm

By Joe Nathanson

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The neatly planted beds contained a variety of leafy greens. Under active cultivation were kale, cauliflower, a variety of peppers, eggplant, cabbages, lettuce, arugula, collard greens, and other produce, as well as all manner of herbs.

It was mid-July and I, along with about two dozen of my professional colleagues, were visiting Plantation Park Heights Urban Farm (PPHUF). This Baltimore City farm is just a few blocks north of Park Circle on several lots near the corner of Park Heights and Springhill avenues. There we were introduced to the director of PPHUF, Richard “Farmer Chippy” Francis.

Knowing little about agriculture myself, I learned from Farmer Chippy, among other things, that there can be three plantings of kale over the course of a year. And, there are many outlets for kale and other produce. The farm’s bounty is regularly found at local farmers’ markets, notably at the Druid Hill Farmers’ Market near the Rawlings Conservatory every Wednesday and in East Baltimore at the Johns Hopkins Farmers’ Market every Thursday during the summer and fall.

Back at the farm, there is a weekly herb and produce stand. And, to combat the effects of living in the Park Heights food desert, there is a weekly “giveaway of our finest produce boxes” every Thursday on a first-come, first-served basis to 21215 neighbors.

As our group learned, the farm serves so many needs. In addition to providing a source of healthy foods for local residents, PPHUF also offers training to young people, from elementary school children learning the basics of urban agriculture to students in local colleges who gain experience in operating a sustainable business. We learned about participating students who were attending

or had graduated from area institutions, such as Johns Hopkins, Howard University and Coppin State. And, the farm is a source of inspiration to a neighborhood that has experienced disinvestment over the decades.

The concept for the farm came about when Farmer Chippy, a native of Trinidad and Tobago, decided to take a detour from his earlier career as a biomedical engineer, working for General Electric Healthcare, among other clients. Having moved to Baltimore about 24 years ago, he joined with other emigrees from the Caribbean to create a way to cultivate a culturally appropriate food supply. Beginning in 2014, they acquired vacant parcels and began planting on what are now about five acres of land. In addition to items planted within beds bordered by wooden slats, there are also hoop houses, which are conducive to growing strawberries, blackberries and certain herbs.

There was help along the way from the community and local officials. Farmer Chippy gives special credit to current city planning director Chris Ryer, who was an early champion of the farm and arranged for a significant grant. In a recent impact statement provided to funders, PPHUF reports that it has served approximately 700 elementary/ middle school students and approximately 500 older students, including those from Woodlawn and Forest Park high schools and Gilman School.

It also notes that it was able to launch “Agrihood Baltimore Farmers’ Market” with the ability to accept both Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program payments. And the report proudly notes that the farm has received official notification from the Maryland Department of Agriculture that it is certified to sell “Hot Peppers and Herbs..

It should be noted that PPHUF is not the only local urban farm, as new entities have sprung up in recent years. Indeed, the Farm Alliance of Baltimore includes about two dozen farm or garden members. But you would be hard pressed to find a local urban farm with a bolder vision than that of Plantation Park Heights.

The farm is planning to expand its educational opportunities. There are plans to build an outdoor kitchen classroom, with a focus on encouraging self-sustainable farming in an urban setting. Students from Morgan State University’s School of Architecture and Planning are helping to design this new structure.

Farmer Chippy also talks of acquiring a nearby building that could serve as a dormitory for a small number of students. But his vision goes far beyond this. He wants to see his enterprise serve as a catalyst for Park Heights Main Street extending from “Dietz and Watson (near Park Circle) to Seven Mile Lane”. With his know-how and drive, should anyone doubt Farmer Chippy? To learn more about PPHUF visit <https://plantationparkheights.org/>.

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