

Fresh Divide: Gardens sprout in Homewood, where residents ‘decided to grow our own food’

“No resident should have to leave their community to go grocery shopping.”



Ayanna Jones, founder of Sankofa Village Community Garden, which turned a drug corridor into an urban garden. ROSSILYNNE CULGAN / THE INCLINE


Rossilynne Culgan
Oct. 17, 2018, 5:30 a.m.

 **SHARE**

([HTTPS://WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/SHARER/SHARER.PHP?U=HTTPS://ARCHIVE.THEINCLINE.COM/2018/10/17/FRESH-DIVIDE-GARDENS-SPROUT-IN-HOMEWOOD-WHERE-RESIDENTS-DECIDED-TO-GROW-OUR-OWN-FOOD/](https://www.facebook.com/sharer/sharer.php?u=https://archive.theincline.com/2018/10/17/fresh-divide-gardens-sprout-in-homewood-where-residents-decided-to-grow-our-own-food/))

 **TWEET**

([HTTPS://TWITTER.COM/SHARE?U=HTTPS://ARCHIVE.THEINCLINE.COM/2018/10/17/FRESH-DIVIDE-GARDENS-SPROUT-IN-HOMEWOOD-WHERE-RESIDENTS-DECIDED-TO-GROW-OUR-OWN-FOOD/](https://twitter.com/share?url=https://archive.theincline.com/2018/10/17/fresh-divide-gardens-sprout-in-homewood-where-residents-decided-to-grow-our-own-food/))

 **EMAIL (MAILTO:?)**

[SUBJECT=FRESH%20DIVIDE%3A%20GARDENS%20SPROUT%20IN%20HOMWOOD%2C%20WHERE%20RESIDENTS%20DECIDED%20TO%20GROW%20OUR%20OWN%20FOOD/&TEXT=FRESH%20DIVIDE%3A%20GARDENS%20SPROUT%20IN%20HOMWOOD%2C%20WHERE%20RESIDENTS%20DECIDED%20TO%20GROW%20OUR%20OWN%20FOOD/](mailto:?subject=FRESH%20DIVIDE%3A%20GARDENS%20SPROUT%20IN%20HOMWOOD%2C%20WHERE%20RESIDENTS%20DECIDED%20TO%20GROW%20OUR%20OWN%20FOOD/&text=FRESH%20DIVIDE%3A%20GARDENS%20SPROUT%20IN%20HOMWOOD%2C%20WHERE%20RESIDENTS%20DECIDED%20TO%20GROW%20OUR%20OWN%20FOOD/)

This is the third of four stories examining food deserts in the Pittsburgh region.

Part 1: [Inside Pittsburgh’s food deserts, where buying milk or veggies is impossible \(https://archive.theincline.com/2018/10/15/fresh-divide-inside-pittsburghs-food-deserts-where-buying-milk-or-veggies-is-impossible/\)](https://archive.theincline.com/2018/10/15/fresh-divide-inside-pittsburghs-food-deserts-where-buying-milk-or-veggies-is-impossible/).

Part 2: [Could an urban farm help those marooned on Pittsburgh’s Hilltop? \(https://theincline.com/2018/10/16/fresh-divide-could-an-urban-farm-help-those-marooned-on-pittsburghs-hilltop/\)](https://theincline.com/2018/10/16/fresh-divide-could-an-urban-farm-help-those-marooned-on-pittsburghs-hilltop/).

Part 4: [After years without a grocery store, a new kind of market comes to Clairton \(https://theincline.com/2018/10/18/fresh-divide-after-years-without-a-grocery-store-a-new-kind-of-market-comes-to-clairton/\)](https://theincline.com/2018/10/18/fresh-divide-after-years-without-a-grocery-store-a-new-kind-of-market-comes-to-clairton/).

Zucchini, tomatoes, mint, beets, strawberries, and raspberries grow in 17 raised beds in a vacant lot on North Braddock Avenue, thanks to Ayanna Jones. Along what used to be a notorious drug corridor in Homewood, Jones is growing gardens – and, more importantly, she said, she’s growing gardeners.

When Jones, 70, grew up in Homewood, her family chose between three grocery stores in town – “everything that we needed was in walking distance,” she said. Now, there’s not a single one, though a bumper crop of grocery stores has sprouted in nearby East Liberty.

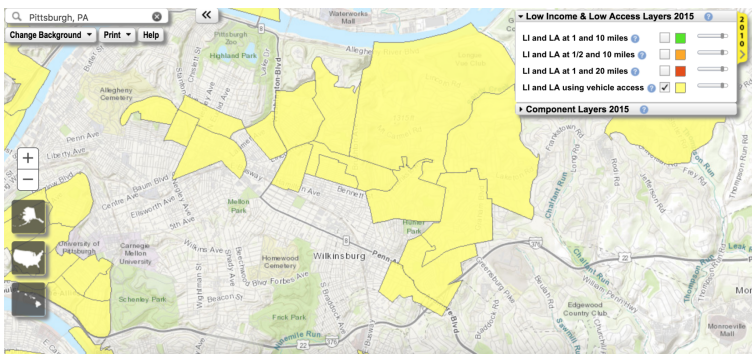
“We’ve not had a grocery store in [Homewood] for 40 years,” said Jones, who now lives on the North Side.

Homewood residents either take the bus, drive, or get driven to grocery stores in neighboring communities like Penn Hills or East Liberty. Often that means people carry their groceries to the bus line and then home.

It’s especially tough for senior citizens, like Maryanne Spurling, 65, who lives in a senior high rise in Homewood, where she said she and her neighbors all have a hard time getting groceries. She describes her community’s food desert, in a word, as terrible.

“We have to get on the bus or either go to Wilkinsburg or East Liberty,” she said. “[I go] maybe once or twice a week, because I can’t carry everything. I have to take it in a small amount.”

She doesn’t have access to a car, so that means she’s carrying the bags by herself onto the bus. Sometimes, she said, a group will go together and pay for a cab service to bring them back home.



Zooming in on Pittsburgh's Homewood area, this USDA map shows low-income census tracts where more than 100 households do not have a vehicle and are more than ½ mile from the nearest supermarket. [U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE ECONOMIC RESEARCH SERVICE FOOD ACCESS RESEARCH ATLAS \(HTTPS://WWW.ERS.USDA.GOV/DATA-PRODUCTS/FOOD-ACCESS-RESEARCH-ATLAS/GO-TO-THE-ATLAS/\)](https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/go-to-the-atlas/)

3 reasons

Rev. Ricky Burgess represents Homewood on Pittsburgh City Council. He grew up there and remembers when the town had multiple grocery stores.

Now, he said, he's "acutely aware of the fact that there's no place to get fresh vegetables," and he's courted stores to open there, but hasn't been successful yet.

So why aren't stores interested?

For three reasons, Burgess said: First, a grocery store needs a high volume of shoppers from a variety of income levels. Second, stores see the potential for theft in poor communities. Finally, he said, the perception of safety becomes an issue.

Burgess continues to try to open a grocer, suggesting a food co-op in Homewood, adding more farmers markets, and continuing discussion about rebuilding the business district to include a grocery store.

Across the nation, [black and Hispanic neighborhoods \(https://hub.jhu.edu/magazine/2014/spring/racial-food-deserts/\)](https://hub.jhu.edu/magazine/2014/spring/racial-food-deserts/) are home to fewer large supermarkets and than their white counterparts, according to research from Johns Hopkins University. The smaller stores available in those neighborhoods usually don't sell healthy whole-grain foods, dairy products, or fresh fruits and veggies, the report found, adding that farmers markets can help fill the gap.

Given Homewood's proximity to East Liberty, some worry about gentrification, which would likely displace black families. If gentrification is going to happen in Homewood, Jones wants some of the resources that would come with it to benefit the community.

There are a few corner stores in Homewood, but they're small shops selling chips and pop, not full grocery stores with fresh fruits and vegetables. So Jones took matters into her own hands.

"We decided to grow our own food," she said.



Growing gardeners

Jones' community garden is one of several established in the past few years as urban agriculture fills the gaps for fresh produce.

Three years ago, Jones founded Sankofa Village Community Garden with the help of Sankofa Village for the Arts and several community grants. The Urban Redevelopment Authority of Pittsburgh owns the land, and Sankofa is in the process of purchasing it. Kids from Sankofa's summer camp and the Learn & Earn program built the garden from the ground up – assembling the raised beds, adding compost, building an irrigation system, planting, and harvesting.

When Jones teaches students how to garden, she's not just talking about putting seeds into soil. She's examining the complexities of gardening through scientific, historical, economic, and emotional lenses.

"We talk about slavery and tilling the soil," she said. "You have to remember in the black community that's the only reference that black people have to tilling the soil is slavery."

She teaches students how Africans developed irrigation and used stars to chart agricultural shifts, and she notices how that piques their interest. She reminds them how the ability to grow your own food is key to self-sufficiency.

In the summertime, young gardeners also get a lesson in entrepreneurship by hosting a farm stand where people can purchase their produce. The students become part of the Sankofa Village Community Garden Credit Union, a rainy day fund Jones maintains for the kids to draw from in case of an emergency, like when one child needed \$40 to help his family pay the electric bill.

When Jones works in the garden, located in a prime location at the corner of North Braddock Avenue and Susquehanna Street, just about every passerby shouts hello or honks their horn. She hands out tomatoes to local families and takes fresh produce to those who can't leave their homes.

Tirelessly, Jones now plans to build a greenhouse at the garden and to renovate an old house next door to offer a kitchen for kids, so they can learn to cook using the vegetables they grew, and even bring home-cooked dinners to their families during the week.

"If we don't start educating our young black children about gardening and the importance of urban agriculture, we're not going to have that sense of feeding ourselves," she said. "We're starting to really affect young people in terms of the importance of growing food."



Collective power

A few blocks from Sankofa Village Community Garden stands the Homewood Historical Urban Farm, run by Black Urban Gardeners and Farmers of Pittsburgh Co-op (BUGs). Raqueeb Bey founded and runs the group, which farms on a 31,000-square foot formerly blighted lot. BUGs recently built a hoop house on the lot, so they can grow food all year.

In addition to Sankofa and the BUGs farm, Homewood is also home to Operation Better Block, Oasis Food, the Monticello Street Garden, and the African Liberation Garden, along with 210 backyard gardens, installed for free by Phipps Conservatory Homegrown program, according to local leaders.

While 210 gardens is already a lot, it's estimated that the reach of those gardens spreads even wider. On average, one gardener shares their produce with about nine different people, according to Lauren DeLorenze, Community Outreach Coordinator for Phipps Conservatory, who works closely with the Homegrown program.

“When we think about food deserts, it's not just a geographic issue. It's certainly an economic issue,” said Gabe Tilove, associate director of Adult Education and Community Outreach for Phipps Conservatory. “We do see backyard gardens as one way to supplement tight food budgets with fresh produce, and it's a way to get kids excited about vegetables, which is difficult for any family.”

BUGs, along with other groups concerned about food access, formed the Homewood Food Access Group. The collective power of those groups merged to create the monthly Harambee Backyard Market, part farmer's market, part arts festival.

Next up, Bey, an Uptown resident who grew up in Homewood, wants to establish a small community grocery store for fruits and vegetables, hopefully by 2020. An exact location isn't set, but she said it will definitely be in Homewood.

“This is a dire strait. No resident should have to leave their community to go grocery shopping. ... Some people don't have access to a car,” said Bey, who also works as Grow Pittsburgh's garden resource center coordinator. “You may work two jobs. Or you may be a single parent and have to lug two or three kids with you. You may be a senior. You may be ill. Having a localized grocery store is important.”

“This is something that is systematically done to oppress the oppressed.”

Editor's Note: Come back tomorrow to read the final installment of this four-part series examining local food deserts, and [sign up here \(https://bit.ly/fresh-divide-newsletter\)](https://bit.ly/fresh-divide-newsletter) to get these stories in your inbox each morning:

Part 1: [Inside Pittsburgh's food deserts, where buying milk or veggies is impossible \(https://theincline.com/2018/10/15/fresh-divide-inside-pittsburghs-food-deserts-where-buying-milk-or-veggies-is-impossible/\)](https://theincline.com/2018/10/15/fresh-divide-inside-pittsburghs-food-deserts-where-buying-milk-or-veggies-is-impossible/)

Part 2: [Could an urban farm help those marooned on Pittsburgh's Hilltop? \(https://theincline.com/2018/10/16/fresh-divide-could-an-urban-farm-help-those-marooned-on-pittsburghs-hilltop?\)](https://theincline.com/2018/10/16/fresh-divide-could-an-urban-farm-help-those-marooned-on-pittsburghs-hilltop?)

Part 4: [After years without a grocery store, a new kind of market comes to Clairton \(https://theincline.com/2018/10/18/fresh-divide-after-years-without-a-grocery-store-a-new-kind-of-market-comes-to-clairton/\)](https://theincline.com/2018/10/18/fresh-divide-after-years-without-a-grocery-store-a-new-kind-of-market-comes-to-clairton/)

How you can help

Here's what local experts say is most helpful to your fellow Pittsburghers – from volunteering to donating to getting out the vote.

With your time:

Attend (<https://www.pittsburghfoodpolicy.org/>) a Food Policy Council meeting, which are open to the public, and get involved with one of the council's groups.

Drive (<https://412foodrescue.org/>) food to local communities, most within a 15-minute drive, after downloading the 412 Food Rescue app.

Volunteer (<mailto:blackfarmerscoop@gmail.com>) with Black Urban Gardeners and Farmers of Pittsburgh Co-op (BUGs) by emailing blackfarmerscoop@gmail.com.

Volunteer (<https://www.svcgpggh.com/>) at Homewood's Sankofa Village Community Garden's work days, donate to the garden, or buy produce in the summer.

With your money:

Attend (<https://www.facebook.com/harambeesbackyardmarket/>), an upcoming Harambee’s Backyard Market.

Buy produce at small corner stores to show merchants that it’s valuable to stock those items, said Sarah Buranskas of the Food Policy Council.

Donate money (or your time) at the food bank.

Shop at your local farmers market.

With your vote:

Attend (<https://www.pittsburghfoodpolicy.org/meetings-and-events?view=calendar&month=October-2018>) a Food Policy Council event to learn from local experts about legislation like the farm bill or SNAP.

Contact

(<http://www.legis.state.pa.us/cfdocs/legis/home/findyourlegislator/>) your elected representatives. “Pittsburghers need to make sure that urban agriculture is evenly distributed in black communities” by making sure they get grants for gardening projects and holding leaders accountable, said Ayanna Jones of Sankofa Village Community Garden.

Sign up (<https://www.pittsburghfoodbank.org/get-involved/advocate/>) for alerts on the food bank’s website to find out when to contact your legislators.

Vote for candidates who support equity – and have the voting record to prove it, said Helen Gerhardt of Just Harvest.

This series was supported by The Pittsburgh Pitch, a project of 100 Days in Appalachia (<https://www.100daysinappalachia.com/>), and the Center for Media Innovation at Point Park University.



SHARE



TWEET



EMAIL (MAILTO:?)

(HTTPS://WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/SHARER/SHARER.PHP?U=HTTPS://ARCHIVE.THEINCLINE.COM/2018/10/11/DIVIDE-GARDENS-SPROUT-IN-HOMEWOOD-WHERE-RESIDENTS-DECIDED-TO-GROW-OUR-OWN-FOOD/)	//TWITTER.COM/SHARE?U=HTTPS://ARCHIVE.THEINCLINE.COM/2018/10/11/DIVIDE-GARDENS-SPROUT-IN-HOMEWOOD-WHERE-RESIDENTS-DECIDED-TO-GROW-OUR-OWN-FOOD/&TEXT=FRESH%20DIVIDE%3A%20GARDENS%20SPROUT%20IN%20HOMEWOOD%2C%	SUBJECT=FRESH%20DIVIDE%3A%20GARDENS%20SPROUT-IN-HOMEWOOD-WHERE-RESIDENTS-DECIDED-TO-GROW-OUR-OWN-FOOD/%0A%0A%22NO%20RESIDENT%20SHOUL
---	---	---