

FRIENDS OF ANIMALS

ACTIONLINE

WINTER 2007-2008

What's in the Water?

**California's Ballot Box
Balderdash**

Decline in Hunters

Alaska Wolves

The Greening of The South Bronx



IT'S A HOT, LATE-SUMMER DAY ON THE shadeless streets of Morrisania in the South Bronx. After passing a few bodegas and fast food restaurants, the "EL" train rattling noisily above, one comes across an oasis, the Wishing Well Community Garden. Here several local high school students tend a bumper crop of organically grown green beans, tomatoes, lettuce, cucumbers and cilantro. Hand-painted signs with botanical illustrations identify the plots.

Some passersby stop, perhaps drawn by the serenity of the spot, and are offered some tomatoes from a large bowl of freshly picked produce. One asks if he can take a luscious-looking eggplant, but gardener Lilian Valdez replies that she's taking it home to her family for dinner that night.

At the start of the 2006 school year, New

York City students began turning a weed-strewn lot into an urban farm. They pulled the weeds, amended the soil, planted wheat and rye as cover crops, created a compost pile, and ordered and planted seeds. Red bricks they unearthed were used to make a pathway.

Some 200 students participated during the school year, but because the garden would reach fruition in the summer, fifteen students worked as paid interns during the peak growing season to maintain Wishing Well and another community garden nearby.

The pilot project, called "Learn It, Grow It, Eat It," was initiated by the nonprofit Council on the Environment in New York City (CENYC), which promotes green spaces and recycling as well as environmental education in the city.¹ The interns also promote farmers' markets; they produced a brochure with a map identifying the dozen farmers markets in the South Bronx.

"In our program students learn about healthy and unhealthy foods, where our food comes from, and the connection to the environment," David Sapphire, a CENYC project coordinator and environmental educator, said during a water break.

"In the garden they learn about plants and the importance of water, sun, and good soil. Through tending the soil, planting, growing, and harvesting, they start to make the connection that healthy food comes from a healthy environment."





Saturdays each month.

Its business model is based on Brooklyn's well-established Park Slope Food Coop in its gentrified namesake neighborhood. As is usual with co-ops, members are required to work some shifts to help keep overhead down. Nelson's business savvy was evident when she persuaded the Park Slope co-op to have some of its 12,000 members fill their shifts at the South Bronx Food Cooperative.

In what is sometimes called the "grocery gap," low-income areas like the South Bronx have little access to healthy foods and fresh produce.² In the local small groceries, or bodegas, it's hard to find even a fresh carrot or stalk of celery. But fast-food restaurants are everywhere. It's no wonder that diet-related illnesses, such as type 2 diabetes and heart disease, are rampant.³ Making fresh produce available in low-income areas is crucial to their residents' health and well-being.



An animal rights activist, Nelson (in photo below, at left) also works full time as director of marketing at a nonprofit ad agency and is pursuing her MBA at Baruch College. In her spare time she started SBFC, with \$15,000 in seed money from the college and Merrill Lynch Entrepreneurship Competition.

"I grew up in the Bronx," Nelson said. "But my family was always into good health and healthy eating. As a student, I went out on the street and surveyed about 80 people about the idea of a food co-op. There was an overwhelmingly positive response.

"But many people thought that those kinds of foods were for 'them,' meaning white people in midtown Manhattan. That's totally wrong. I just want to give back to the community I came from. All people have a right to eat healthy food."⁴

The efforts of people like David Saphire and Zena Nelson are making that right a reality.



Photo Courtesy of Zena Nelson

- 1 Council on the Environment in New York City (<http://www.cenyc.org/>).
- 2 See Gail Robinson, "New York's Grocery Gap," *Gotham Gazette* (21 Nov. 2005).
- 3 Sarah Kershaw, "Gap in Illness Rates Between Rich and Poor New Yorkers Is Widening, Study Shows," *The New York Times* (28 Sep. 2007).
- 4 Zena Nelson, founder and executive director of the South Bronx Food Cooperative (phone interview with author, 10 Sep. 2007).



Complementing the efforts of CENYC is the South Bronx Food Cooperative, the brainchild of Zena Nelson, who serves as executive director. Nelson recently launched the co-op to provide organic and conventionally grown fruits and vegetables, groceries, health foods, and vitamins. The co-op, which is in temporary quarters, is open two