
Memphis church shepherds farmers market into year-around green grocer

By Jane Roberts

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For three growing seasons, Rev. Kenneth Robinson kept a mental tally of the broccoli, cabbage and carrots streaming out of the farmers market at an abandoned fish market in South Memphis.

When white eggplant showed up at one of the stalls last summer and no one knew how to prepare it, he made another note.

In June, the notes will be writ large at the corner of Mississippi Boulevard and South Parkway. With \$1.2 million in grants, the community development arm of St. Andrew AME Church is opening a green grocer in 3,600 square feet of an eyesore that was the empty Carter's Fish Market.

"The common wisdom was that a farmers market in South Memphis would not be as successful as other locations because the consumer demand would not be there," Robinson said.

"Our vendors who sell at other places tell us they do as well if not better here," he said.

The market, open Thursday afternoons during the growing season, produced about \$5,000 in sales a day last season, enough to keep eight vendors busy, and encouraged.

The downside was that, in October, the place closed down.

The market will still happen each Thursday afternoon, but instead of fresh produce being available one day a week, the store at 1400 Mississippi Blvd., will be open six. It

will have a dairy case, meats and other groceries.

Including vendors, the store will employ about 40 people.

“We have to overcome some obstacles in where we are sourcing food outside fresh produce, so we can get better prices and pass them on to our customers,” said The Works executive director Roshun Austin.

“The eggs are often sold at other farmers markets at \$4 a dozen. That won’t work here.”

The average household income around St. Andrew is \$36,000; statewide, the average is \$54,000.

She is looking for grants to underwrite the cost of groceries and education kitchens.

The area has stabilized in the last decade, losing only 6 percent of population between 2000 and 2010. But the decade before, it lost nearly 20 percent. The people who are left are 90 percent African-American and mostly elderly.

The other dynamic is that the closest grocery stores are the Kroger on Union Avenue in Midtown or the Kroger in Southgate Shopping Center on Third Street. Both are more close to 2.5 miles away.

“But it’s a 45-minute bus ride to either grocery store,” said Curtis Thomas, deputy executive director of The Works Inc., the church’s community development corporation.

“Two-and-a-half miles doesn’t sound like a lot if you have your own car. For elderly people trying to haul groceries back on the bus, it’s pretty difficult.”

Last week, construction workers at the now-gutted Carter’s were building gutters. Inside, plumbing was in place for a demonstration kitchen and rough cuts on the floor showed positions for three cooking stations, open for people who want to learn to cook diabetic- and heart-friendly diets.

When they finish, they’ll get a free bag of ingredients to make that day’s test recipe at home.

“We’re going to have a 1,200-square-foot demonstration and education kitchen,”

Thomas said.

“We’ll have a nice big open space, enough seating for 25 students or observers, all facing an island,” he said. “Just like a cooking show.

“We learned a lot while operating the farmers market. People know what they like to eat, but a lot of the produce people had never had before. The perfect example is the white eggplant,” Thomas said.

“We got a lot of questions. We have sample recipes on site we can give people. With the green grocer, we decided to take it a step further and offer free classes.”

Toward the end of the tomato season, planners think it makes sense to offer a demonstration on how to can. “We have lots of people in the community who know how to can. We want to share the resources that exist in this community,” Thomas said.

The idea for South Memphis Farmers Market was born in the same place, starting in 2008 when residents were invited to work with the University of Memphis to map out the South Memphis Revitalization Plan, affectionately known as the SoMeRap.

“One of the things consistently brought up by residents was food security. People are tired of having to go so far to get food, not only groceries, but restaurants too. It was a huge concern. We heard it in every way: As part of economic development, health, neighborhood stability. ... Food was a part of everything.”

By the time SoMeRap was approved by the City Council in March 2010, more than 1,000 South Memphis residents had attended a meeting or charrette, volunteered to serve on a committee or filled out surveys, including Patricia Lacey, one of 25 residents who have spent three years watching the farmers market and daring to think what could come next.

“It is important to me to have this type of service in the community because of the access it provides. This area has been defined as a food desert. There is no easy access to fruits and vegetables. This is a way for older people to have an easier way to improve their health. It will be open more than one day a week.”

In the meantime, with a \$100,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Austin has hired a market manager to coordinate vendors, manage market day volunteers

and get the word out about the new store.

“Word-of-mouth is everything in this community,” she said, while traffic sailed by on South Parkway. “And we have our target market,” she said, nodding to St. Andrew across the street. “We have 1,200 adult members, 1,700 with children under 18. The church is open seven days a week.”

In 15 years, The Works has built low-income housing for 116 families, including 80 apartments for senior citizens. It has sent hundreds of children through its K-5 Circles of Success charter school, built a child care center, laid the groundwork for a refurbished city park down the street on Lauderdale and shepherded the South Memphis Farmers Market.

“The green grocer is a little bit of compromise,” Robinson said. “Now we have six days a week access to fresh produce. I believe it in turn will further make the case that there is a demand locally for a grocery store.

“We are determined to have a healthy, sustainable community in South Memphis, but the work is gargantuan.”



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