



Black & Brown Women Healing the Land & the People

EPS. 2

WITH LEAH LEE

Working for a Future of Food for All.

Food For All is a movement advocating for equitable access to real, nutritious food for all people regardless of race, income bracket, or zip code.

Despite being one of the wealthiest nations in the world, the United States remains well behind comparable countries in its ability to provide reliable, affordable, and consistent access to nutritious food for millions of its most vulnerable citizens.

The issue of hunger isn't a new one. Political indifference, systemic racism, socioeconomic segregation, and policies rooted in profit instead of people have driven areas like the St. Louis region into an undeniable state of crisis.

Our region has long been celebrated as an agricultural hub in the Midwest, yet tens of thousands of local residents remain food and nutrition insecure.

Grocery stores are too often replaced with gas stations and convenience stores, severely limiting access to healthy food. Additionally, those left behind by the food ecosystem face overwhelming barriers to growing and distributing their own produce.

Food For All aims to end the generational cycle of inadequate access to nutritious food and the preventable diet-related diseases that come with decades of poor nutrition.

Through education, advocacy, and action, we will build a world where there is Food For All.

Jan, Darren, & Sara

Jan Marson
Co-Founder

Darren Jackson
Co-Founder

Sara Bannoura
Lead Researcher, Storyteller

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Using This Toolkit

Throughout this toolkit you will find key information about the state of our regional and national food ecosystem as well as historical and recent data highlighting political, economic, and health trends that created our current crisis. Additionally, we have provided informational links to help you continue your exploration and have included ways you can help fight food insecurity.

Why Food For All?

Nearly **400,000** people in the Greater St. Louis region don't have reliable access to affordable, nutritious food.

The region had a **\$298 million** food budget shortfall in 2022.¹

391,900
in the bi-state region
are hungry, including
117,120
children.²

that's
1 in 7
people

and
1 in 6
children

“ People need food. They need someone to meet them where they are because they have to spend money on other bills.

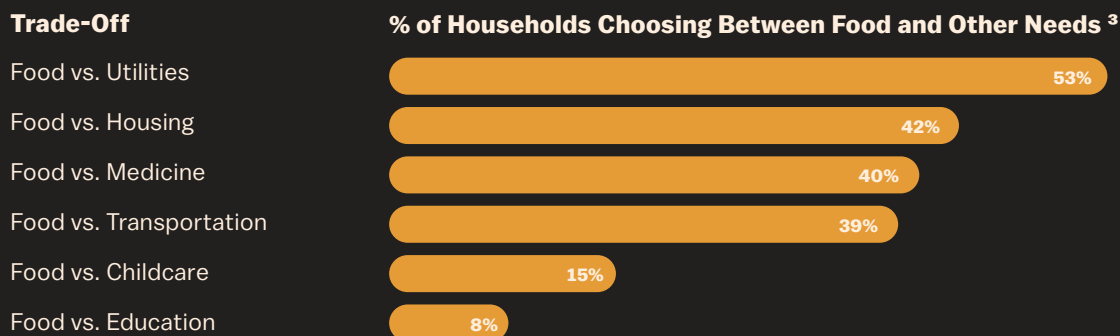
Pay their gas bill or get caught up on rent or use that to buy their child a new pair of tennis shoes?

Leah Lee [LL]

Food or ...?

6 Impossible Trade-Offs for Food-Insecure Homes

The 2021 Food Assistance and Hunger in the Heartland report shows that clients of food pantries are forced to make difficult decisions on a daily basis to afford life's necessities.



The University of Missouri Interdisciplinary Center for Food Security interviewed families from across the 26 counties served by the St. Louis Area Foodbank for this specific dataset.



Leah Lee

Founder

Growing Food Growing People

In her own words, Leah Lee has “this amazing talent of forcing people to eat okra raw.”

Leah, the “Okra Whisperer,” grew up with little to no fresh food in her neighborhood, where “the community’s first interaction with a vegetable was out of a can.” Nearly 400,000 people in our region live this reality, where health and wellness are simply out of reach.

Leah had easy access to fresh, quality vegetables for the first time in her life when she learned to grow her own food just a few years ago.

Food justice wasn’t something she heard people talk about until she entered the scene—and now, the conversations are everywhere. Leah has always wanted to be a teacher, to share knowledge with people and watch them grow with it. She’s on a mission to heal the land and the people, and no one is stopping the Okra Whisperer.

Growing Food Growing People is dedicated to ensuring food security, enhancing community well-being, and empowering individuals with gardening, fresh produce, and wellness workshops.

Committed to supporting, feeding, and empowering the community, Leah shares her magic with okra and the abundance of the land with the people.

Visit their website to learn more about their impactful work and how you can get involved: gfgp-stl.com.

Inside the Episode

Black & Brown Women Healing the Land & the People

Title

Leah Lee

Sara Bannoura

Featuring

Host

This episode focuses on Leah Lee, an urban gardener and community activist who has transformed her life and her community by growing food in areas with little to no access to fresh, nutritious food.

Leah discusses her journey from inheriting her father's plants to becoming a key figure in urban agriculture. She is now healing the land, feeding people, and nurturing the community.



*Scan this code with your
smartphone camera to
listen to this episode.*

Talking Points

A. From Packaged to Fresh

Leah walks us through the transition from processed, packaged food to fresh, home-grown vegetables in her neighborhood, highlighting the impact on community health and relationships.

B. Children are Hungry

Children in food-insecure households lack the nutritious food they need for healthy growth. They're eating what parents can afford, not what their bodies need.

C. Holistic Wellness with the Soil

Leah shares personal stories illustrating how interacting with the soil and gardening can provide mental health benefits to the community at large, offering a refuge and a space for healing.

D. Empowering Black & Brown Women

As a Black woman, Leah focuses on empowering other women of color to grow their own food and reconnect with the land for healing and wellness as they care for our communities.

E. Education & Exposure

The lack of access to whole foods has traumatized our relationship with eating. Leah emphasizes the importance of reintroducing people to fresh food and changing the narrative around vegetables.

F. Change Systems for Real Change

For healthier communities, Leah calls for systemic and policy changes, advocating for support for farmers and transforming vacant lots into vibrant gardens where children can see food grow.



“

I remember the same corner that I serve on; my great-grandmother served at the church across the street in the food pantry, giving out food for families.

Now I'm feeding those same families, but with fresh vegetables as opposed to processed, packaged food.

There was a need, and I was able to meet that need. And so, in exchange, relationships formed. Trust was built because I wasn't just on the corner trying to extract something from a community that is already experiencing a deficit.

[LL]

Families struggling with food insecurity often rely on charitable donations to make ends meet while living under economic hardship. According to Feeding America, **49 million Americans⁴** received food assistance in 2022.

The majority of charitable donations often end up looking like boxed, canned, and processed ready-to-eat items. While these items help ease the physical discomfort of hunger, they are almost always high in caloric intake but very low in nutritional value.

These ultra-processed foods make up the majority of the American diet due to their availability, affordability, and addictive additives.

Food insecurity is financial insecurity. All that's good for you is expensive, and all that's bad is abundant and cheap.

Those without the means to afford life's necessities are left with no choice but to feed their families with what's readily available and affordable.

“ I looked around, and there was **no food like this available** for me or my neighbors.

A lot of people, especially in my community, had their first interaction with vegetables was out of a can, and we know that’s not how vegetables taste.

Imagine existing while you’re hungry and all you’re eating is hot fries and a Pepsi. You’re all discombobulated on the inside. You don’t know left from right.

They’re hungry. These children aren’t performing in school because they’re hungry.

[LL]



“ You just let these children walk past you all day and they’re hungry? Don’t you want to feed them?

Do you really want to see them die from the inside out because all they have is trash to choose from?

[LL]

What does a typical meal of a food-insecure child look like?

- They probably don’t eat breakfast. If they do, it’s likely a pancake on a stick.
- For lunch, it’s definitely noodles or a processed lunch-meat sandwich.
- And then dinner is probably chicken nuggets, French fries, or maybe boxed mac and cheese.
- Nothing of substance, nothing to meet the needs inside our bodies. None of those needs are being met.
- It’s just something to hold us over until we eat another bag of hot fries tomorrow, or maybe some Doritos.

[LL]



“ We present love. Food that’s grown from the ground—that’s love.

Hot fries and Takis—that’s trash.

And we don’t feed people we love trash.

[LL]

Growing Food, Growing People



I want my own school in the hood.

I want mothers to come here and relax with me.

And I want them to think they're growing food, but really, we are growing together as people.

[LL]

Everything changed for Leah in 2015 after her father passed away, and she realized he had a secret green thumb. A year later, Leah's neighbor introduced her to growing produce on her patio, giving her access to fresh food for the first time.

Leah began seeing the disparities in her community and started Growing Food Growing People in 2019, with the mission of improving food accessibility and fostering community well-being through gardening.

During the 2020 pandemic, Leah turned her backyard into an urban garden, hosting yoga and gardening sessions for local women, nourishing both their bodies and spirits.

Regenerative

Leah's vision is to create a farm school that teaches regenerative living and restores the tradition of living off the land. She aims to provide representation and empowerment for people who look like her, fostering a deep connection to the land and promoting healthy food accessibility.



I have watched this entanglement with the land, thinking that it's food that's going to just be the foundation of my school, but it's really wellness.

[LL]

Wellness & the Soil



My friend called me and said... I just wanted to let you know that yesterday was a hard day for me. I was contemplating suicide.

And this is one of my strong friends. She's a mother. She's successful. She's beautiful. On the outside looking in, you would think she has it all together. And she was contemplating suicide.

[LL]

Food Justice is Wellness Justice

Food justice is about more than just access to nutritious food. It's about creating spaces that nourish our entire being—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. This is deeply personal for many of us. At Food City, we've heard powerful stories, non-stop, across our region. Leah's story reminds us of the urgent and important need for healing spaces and holistic approaches to wellness, and the power of healing with food.

Create Healing Spaces

We must advocate for the creation and protection of safe, healing spaces in every community. Local governments, nonprofits, and community leaders need to work together to establish, support, and maintain gardens, farms, and wellness spaces that are accessible to all.

Protect Healing Spaces

Sacred community spaces should remain untouched by commercialization. Local policymakers and community leaders should work to protect these areas from development and commercial exploitation.



My space was a space of solace for her. It was a space of peace. And I would like to think it was because I was there, but no.

It was because she knew there was access to the land and there was access to the soil.

[LL]

Backed by Science

While gardening may seem like a simple activity, it has profound impacts on our health. According to the Preventive Medicine Reports, gardening is associated with a wide range of positive health outcomes, including reductions in depression and anxiety symptoms, stress, mood disturbances, and BMI, as well as increases in quality of life, sense of community, physical activity levels, and cognitive function.

Integrate & Empower

Our Food For All call to action is to recognize, promote, and institutionalize the mental health benefits of gardening, farming, and working in the soil. This includes integrating horticultural therapy into mental health programs and advocating for community-led farming initiatives in our schools, neighborhoods, churches, and centers that allow more people to experience the healing power of nature.

“ **Health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.**

[WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION 1948]



Why has your focus been on women?

“

Because I am a woman.

Because I know the hardships that women face, especially women who look like me and you.

I am a servant, and I'm here to meet a need. Women who look like us need to know and be empowered to grow their own food.

Not only to grow their own food but to reconnect with the land for healing. The food is great, and some plants you only need to plant once—they'll keep coming back.

But women need constant care. We need to practice wellness so we can go back and take care of our families.

So we receive healing and, in turn, help heal the land. It's a whole domino effect. This is sacred ground. We heal and grow together.

I love being a part of that cycle.

[LL]

Listen to Black & Brown Women

Dr. Robert Harvey highlighted the importance of Black & Brown women in feeding and healing people in our first episode *How America Created Its Failing Food Ecosystem*.



Scan this code with your smartphone camera to listen to this episode.

“I want to name that we are not putting the onus of solving this problem, this injustice, on Black women, Indigenous women, and Latina women in an extractive way... ‘Give us your knowledge, and we’ll go figure it out,’” Dr. Harvey says. **“No. You are the knowledge bearer. You are also the power holder. You are also the voter.”**

Dr. Harvey is a visionary leader in food justice and education reform, serving as the president of FoodCorps. With a background in Black indigeneity, sociology, and theology, Dr. Harvey explores the intersection of public health, food justice, and education equity.

At FoodCorps, he aims to ensure every public school child receives locally sourced, scratch-cooked, culturally affirming meals twice a day by 2030.

What Can We Do?

- one** Get involved in local community gardens and learn the basics of urban agriculture. Start small by growing easy vegetables like okra on your patio or balcony.
- two** Empower women to take charge of their food sources. Organize workshops and community groups focused on teaching women how to grow their own food and reconnect with the land.
- three** Promote gardening as a form of therapy. Create safe spaces where community members, especially women, can engage with the soil and plants to relieve stress and improve mental health.
- four** Advocate for better nutritional options in schools and local communities. Partner with local organizations to provide fresh, healthy meals to children and educate them on the importance of nutrition.
- five** Engage in policy advocacy to address systemic issues in food security. Mobilize community members to contact lawmakers and push for policies that support sustainable agriculture and food equity.
- six** Write to your local representatives about the importance of food security for children. Share personal stories and data to highlight the urgent need for legislative support.
- seven** Establish or support food pantries and distribution programs that provide fresh produce to underserved communities. Encourage donations and volunteer efforts to sustain these initiatives.





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