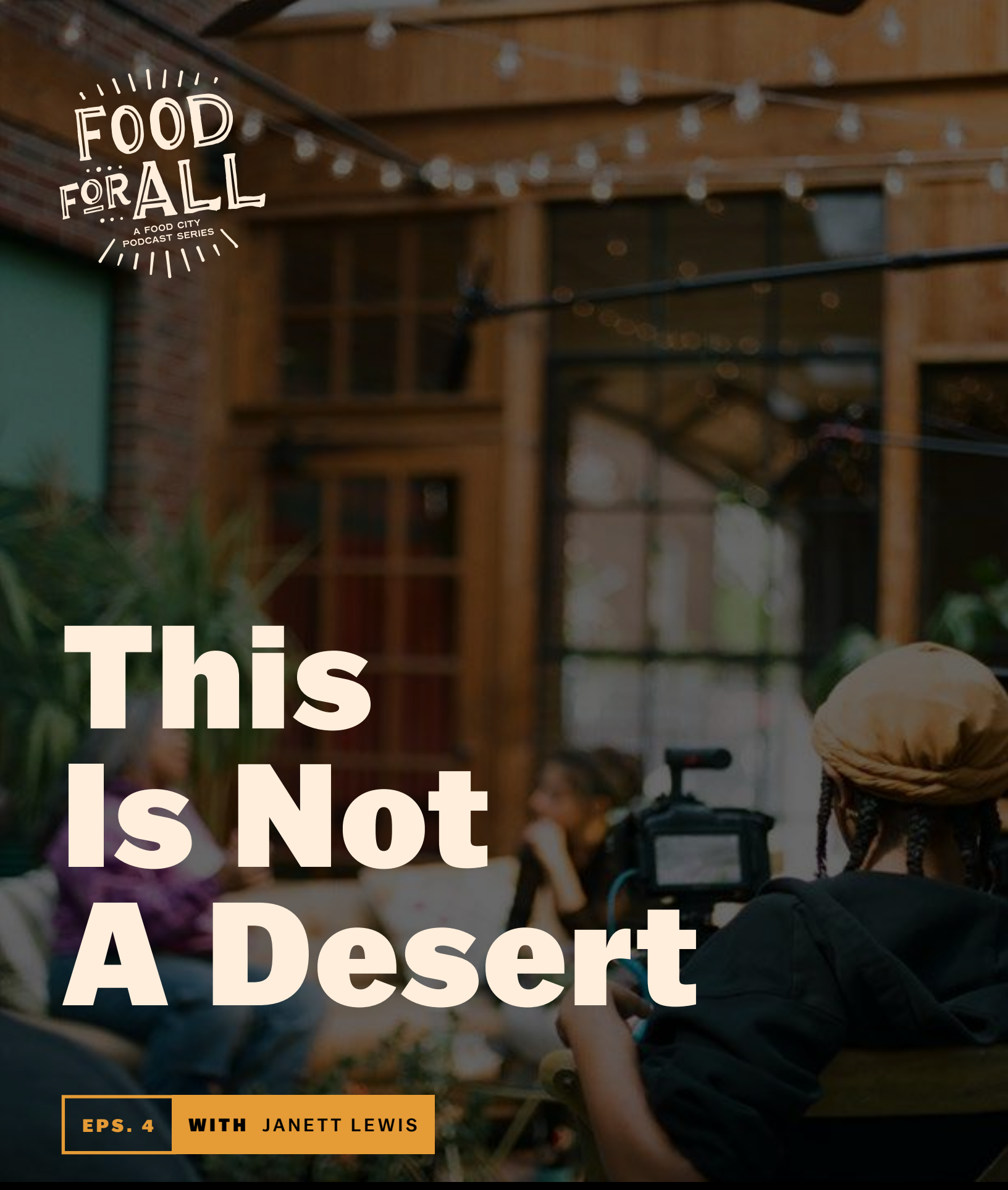

This Is Not A Desert

EPS. 4 WITH JANETT LEWIS

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.

SERVING OUR COMMUNITIES
FOOD CITY

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

1,2. Map the Meal Gap 2024, Feeding America

> People go outside of their door and can't find any nutrition anywhere.

You got fast food restaurants, dollar stores and no real nutritious food.

Once the Shop 'n Save closed, it left Spanish Lake with only one grocery store to feed 18,000 residents.

Janett Lewis [JL]

Areas with Low Access and Low Income

Population with Limited Food Access, Low Income, Percent by Tract

- **Over 50%**
- **20.1 - 50%**
- **5.1 - 20%**
- **Under 5.1%**

USDA - FARA 2019

Janett Lewis

Founder & Executive Director

Rustic Roots Sanctuary

Janett Lewis, founder of Rustic Roots Sanctuary in Spanish Lake, Missouri, is more than a farmer—she is a healer, advocate, and community leader dedicated to reclaiming food sovereignty for her community. Her work goes beyond growing food; it's about restoring dignity, nurturing connections, and confronting the systemic barriers that make healthy food inaccessible.

Rustic Roots began as a small community garden on a neglected property and has grown into a 6.5-acre urban farm producing over 20,000 pounds of fresh food annually. After three Shop 'n Save stores closed in Spanish Lake in late 2018, leaving the community with only one grocery store, Rustic Roots stepped in as a crucial source of fresh produce, directly addressing the gap in food access.

The farm distributes 90% of its harvest back into the community through programs like weekly food deliveries to seniors and residents with a disability. The work at Rustic Roots highlights the broader need for structural change, advocating for food justice as an essential component of racial and economic equity in neglected communities.

Rustic Roots Sanctuary is a 6.5-acre sustainable urban farm located in Spanish Lake, Missouri. The sanctuary is more than just a farm; it is a center for holistic healing, community development, and sustainable living.

In a shrinking, low-income community, recent grocery store closures have deepened racial and economic disparities in food access. Rustic Roots addresses these immediate and systemic challenges by providing fresh, organic food, creating educational and healing spaces, and supporting the community's long-term resilience.

Learn more about the sanctuary at rusticrootssanctuary.org

Inside the Episode

This is Not a Desert

Title

Janett Lewis

Featuring

Sara Bannoura

Host

In Episode 4 of the Food For All Podcast, we talk with Janett Lewis, founder of Rustic Roots Sanctuary in Spanish Lake. Janett's journey goes beyond growing food—it's about reclaiming community, healing generational trauma, and breaking down systemic barriers to nutritious food. Through her work, Janett turns soil into hope and farm rows into spaces of healing and opportunity.

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

Talking Points

A. Food Deserts and Community Resilience

We explore how under-resourced communities like Spanish Lake face systemic food insecurity and show the land's true potential for growth and change.

B. Urban Farming and Local Food Production

We discuss how small-scale farms and community gardens are part of the solution to a chronic problem and can revitalize neighborhoods and reconnect people with healthy food.

C. Breaking the Bad Food Cycle for Children

We highlight the importance of introducing children to fresh food early on and reshaping their attitudes towards vegetables and healthy eating.

D. Systemic Neglect and Food Access

We examine how the lack of infrastructure and investment limits access to fresh, nutritious food in marginalized communities across the U.S.

E. Healing through Nature and Food

We show how working with the land and the soil can heal not only the body but also emotional wounds, including intergenerational and ancestral trauma.

F. Sustainability and Reclaiming the Land

We reveal how growing local food can break reliance on industrial food systems and create sustainable, food-secure futures for communities.

From Chips to Fresh: Reconnecting Kids with Real Food

Growing food for kids is about breaking the junk food cycle and teaching them real nutrition.

Many children, disconnected from real food, are stuck eating processed, chemical-filled meals that lack nourishment. Exposing them to fresh produce, straight from the ground, can be a game changer.

Most have never tasted real, flavorful food, and when they do, it's a revelation—suddenly, vegetables aren't gross, and healthy food isn't boring.

It's about shifting their perception and showing them what food should really taste like.

> Nothing is more irritating than watching kids get out of school and head straight to the gas station for a bag of chips.

We started farming in our backyard because we wanted to ensure our community had access to fresh food and proper nutrition.

They're also learning at the farm that food is grown—it doesn't just come out of a can. You would be amazed at how many children don't realize that you don't just go to the store and buy food; it's actually grown from a living plant.

[JL]

“

This is not a desert.

We can put any seed in the ground in Spanish Lake and pretty much grow food.

[JL]

Not a Desert, Just Neglected: Reclaiming the Land for Real Food

The term "food desert" conjures up images of lifeless, barren land, but Spanish Lake is anything but. The land isn't the problem—it's the neglect and lack of investment that keep fresh, nutritious food out of reach. The real issue lies in broken systems that fail to support communities in accessing the resources they need to thrive.

Like many areas labeled as "food deserts," Spanish Lake has fertile, arable land capable of growing healthy, sustainable food. The potential is right there, waiting to be tapped. What's lacking is the infrastructure, investment, and support to turn that potential into reality. Communities like Spanish Lake have deep cultural and social roots, and with the right tools, they can turn that energy into local food systems that sustain them.

Urban farming, community gardens, and agricultural initiatives could easily transform these so-called deserts into thriving food oases. These initiatives don't just provide fresh food—they reconnect people to the land, teaching them that food doesn't have to come from a can or a convenience store. It grows right from the earth, just waiting to be cultivated.

The narrative around "food deserts" needs to change. The land isn't barren—it's full of life and possibility. The solution lies in empowering people to reclaim and cultivate that land, creating resilient, food-secure futures where communities like Spanish Lake are seen for what they truly are: places of growth, abundance, and untapped potential.

“

It’s almost like back in the day when we had Victory Gardens– everybody was growing their own food because they had to.

We should start feeling like we have to again.

It’s a matter of life and death.

[JL]

The Great Depression

1929 - 1939

The economic collapse of the Great Depression caused widespread unemployment, poverty, and severe food insecurity.

Millions of Americans struggled to afford basic necessities, with many experiencing hunger and malnutrition. To stretch their limited budgets, families turned to cheap, calorie-dense foods like potatoes, bread, beans, and pasta.

Depression Gardens

Economic hardship led to increased home gardening for self-reliance, with families growing fruits and vegetables to supplement diets and cut grocery costs. Home canning became essential for year-round food preservation, providing community support during a time of widespread poverty and food insecurity.

World War II

1939 - 1945

The U.S. government introduced rationing to ensure scarce resources were fairly distributed and the military had enough supplies; citizens received ration books to purchase limited quantities of goods.

The war led to the mass production of processed foods like canned meats, powdered milk, and instant coffee—dramatically shifting American diets toward convenient, processed, shelf-stable products that would persist long after the war ended.

To meet military and domestic needs, farms were pushed to increase output using synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, and mechanization. These advancements marked the rise of industrial agriculture.

Victory Gardens

To reduce pressure on the public food supply, Americans were encouraged to grow their own food through Victory Gardens. These gardens were promoted by the U.S. government as a patriotic duty, encouraging citizens to grow their own fruits, vegetables, and herbs to reduce pressure on the nation's agricultural system and ensure that enough food was available for troops and civilians alike.

By 1944, nearly 20 million home and community Victory Gardens were producing 40% of the country's fresh vegetables, fostering a sense of community and self-sufficiency while alleviating food shortages.

The Rise of Processed Foods and the Industrialization of Agriculture

Post-war government policies transformed the U.S. food system, prioritizing industrial agriculture, mass production, and convenience over nutrition.

Processed foods and fast food became staples, causing health issues and disconnecting people from real food. These shifts entrenched inequitable policies, harming marginalized communities and the environment, while replacing fresh food with nutrient-poor, profit-driven options.

Proliferation of Processed Foods:
The war spurred the mass production of processed and packaged foods designed for convenience and long shelf life, such as canned meats, powdered milk, and instant soups. These foods, often high in sodium, sugar, and unhealthy fats, became staples in American diets, especially in low-income communities where fresh food access is limited.

Chemical Exposure:
The war accelerated the use of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers in agriculture, increasing chemical exposure for farmworkers—many of whom are low-wage, migrant laborers. These workers, predominantly people of color, face higher rates of pesticide-related illnesses, respiratory issues, and long-term health consequences due to inadequate protections and poor working conditions.

Factory Farming:
The rise of factory farming has intensified the use of antibiotics and growth hormones in meat production, contributing to antibiotic resistance, which poses a significant public health threat. Pollution from these farms contaminates water sources, affecting the health of nearby communities, often those with limited political power and resources to fight back.

Unequal Support for Small Farmers:
Unequal Support for Farmers: Government subsidies and agricultural policies largely excluded Black, Indigenous, and small-scale farmers, contributing to land loss and economic hardship. This exclusion has had a lasting impact, limiting these communities' ability to grow healthy, culturally relevant food and maintain economic stability.

From Garden to Convenience to Disease

"

Food started changing somewhere around the 1950s. It all became about convenience foods—easily packaged and prepared.

Now all of this stuff is being created in labs and packaged to extend the life of things that, once upon a time, may have been natural.

What we're eating is a bunch of chemicals and shelf-life extenders, and that can't really be nutritious.

We saw when COVID-19 exploded. Black and brown people were hit a lot harder than our white counterparts.

They say preexisting conditions, but diabetes, heart disease, so many of **these diseases that are taking people out are brought on by a lack of nutrition.**

[JL]

By the mid-20th century, convenience became king. The rise of pre-packaged, ready-to-eat meals like TV dinners in the 1950s made life easier, but at a cost. These heavily processed foods were pumped full of additives, preservatives, and artificial junk to extend shelf life and fake flavor, all while loading the diet with fat, sugar, and sodium.

Traditional home-cooked meals fell to the wayside as processed, calorie-packed options took over. Fresh, whole foods became a rarity, replaced by cheap, nutrient-poor garbage that dominated American plates.

Monoculture farming took off too, with crops like corn and wheat ruling the fields. Corn, especially, wormed its way into everything—thanks to high-fructose corn syrup, it became the backbone of processed foods.

This shift to factory food fueled a health disaster. Fast food chains and processed meals became the go-to, leading to a diet packed with fats, sugars, and chemicals. The result? Skyrocketing rates of obesity, heart disease, diabetes, and chronic illness, hitting hardest in communities that already had limited access to real, nutritious food.

It takes a catastrophe for people to wake up.

I think that's how so many things are off balance in the universe. Instead of doing the things that we know are right and just doing them because they're right, it takes an actual catastrophe or the bottom to fall out or our whole lives to blow up, to really recognize we need to make these changes.

[JL]