

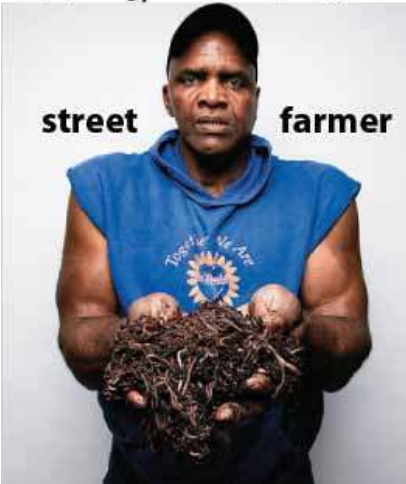
**GROWING POWER** is a national nonprofit organization and land trust supporting people from diverse backgrounds, and the environments in which they live, by helping to provide equal access to healthy, high-quality, safe and affordable food for people in all communities.

# TOGETHER WE ARE **GROWING POWER** press kit



FEATURED IN *NYTimes Magazine*

**The New York Times Magazine**



SEE Page 12

FEATURED IN *Oprah Magazine*



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FEATURED IN *Time Magazine*



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## FAST FACTS

..... about **GROWING POWER**

**Founded:** 1993

**Founder:** Former pro basketball player Will Allen

**Location:** Milwaukee, WI, with satellite offices in Chicago, IL, and Madison, WI

### What is Growing Power?

Growing Power is the last working farm inside the Milwaukee city limits, with six historic greenhouses, year-round hoop-houses, and farm animal pens supporting several agricultural functions - all organized within 3 acres. Growing Power is the leader in integrated, diversified urban sustainable agriculture and a center of innovation, learning, and inspiration.

### Growing Power and the community

In 2010, over 15,000 visitors explored the Growing Power Community Food Center and three thousand volunteers contributed countless volunteer hours of farm labor to Growing Power.

### Who visits Growing Power?

Teachers, students, schools, government agencies, farmers, activists, backyard and master gardeners, community members and more.

### What do community members do at Growing Power?

Learn about sustainable community food systems through educational tours, hands-on learning, service learning, monthly workshops, annual conferences and other training programs.

### Who works for Growing Power?

Sixty-five staff and 25 interns and apprentices at any given time. They are experts in sustainable food production and distribution, aquaponics, composting, vermiculture, renewable energy, mushroom production, beekeeping, animal husbandry, marketing, project planning, youth development, training, and food policy development.





# about WILL ALLEN

WILL ALLEN, founder and CEO of Growing Power Inc., is recognized as the preeminent practitioner of urban agriculture in America and throughout the world.

Will grew up on a small farm in Maryland, the second-youngest of six children of a sharecropper. Despite a strict rule of his father's - no sports until all farm chores were done - he became a standout basketball player in high school and the first African-American scholarship athlete at the University of Miami. He eventually became the men's basketball team captain, and still holds a number of Miami Hurricanes records. Will graduated with a degree in education.

Will was drafted in both the National Basketball Association and the American Basketball Association. He played in the ABA for a year and then entered the European League, playing for Belgium.

While living in Belgium, Will reconnected with his farming roots. He observed the intensive methods used on small plots by local farmers, and began applying those methods in a garden where he grew food for his family and teammates.

Upon returning to the United States, Will began a career in corporate sales and marketing. Job opportunities brought him to Oak Creek, a suburb of Milwaukee, his wife's hometown and site of her family farm.

Eventually, Will tired of corporate life and took over operation of the farm. In 1993, wanting a place to sell his produce, he located a vacant garden center with three acres on Milwaukee's north side.

As it turned out, the small property was the last tract in the city of Milwaukee still zoned for agriculture. Will realized he could not only sell food from his own farm in Oak Creek, he could grow food on-site in a neighborhood where there was little fresh food to be found.

The ultimate direction of Will's life truly changed when young people from the neighborhood, including



kids who lived in the largest low-income public housing project in Milwaukee, began to ask him for advice and assistance with growing their own vegetables. Almost overnight, Will took up the mantle of teacher and trainer, and the impromptu gathering of neighborhood children became the Youth Corps, a program that continues today. In 1995, Growing Power Inc. was born: a not-for-profit center for urban agriculture training and building community food security systems.

Will has been an innovator in methods of composting, vermicomposting (using worms to refine and fertilize compost) and aquaponics (growing fish and food plants in a closed system). These and other intensive practices result in remarkable yields of food, even in a very small area.

Today, Growing Power employs a staff of 65 and is involved in more than 70 projects and outreach programs in Milwaukee, across the United States and throughout the world. Will has trained and taught in the Ukraine, Macedonia and Kenya, and has plans in place to create community food centers in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Haiti. In the U.S., Growing Power has set up 15 Regional Outreach Training Centers throughout the U.S.

In 2008, Will was awarded the John D. and Katherine T. McArthur Foundation "Genius Grant" and named a McArthur Fellow - only the second farmer ever to be so honored.

Will is also a member of the Clinton Global Initiative. On Feb. 9, 2010, was one of four national spokesmen who stood on the dais with First Lady Michelle Obama at the White House to launch her "Let's Move!" initiative to reverse the epidemic of childhood obesity by 2015.

In May 2010, *Time* magazine named Will as one of 100 World's Most Influential People.

Despite his busy schedule as an international ambassador for urban agriculture and universal food security, Will continues to farm his own property in Oak Creek and direct operations at Growing Power, still headquartered in the original location on Silver Spring Drive in Milwaukee. **GP**





# about **GROWING POWER**



## **The good food revolution has begun!**

**Growing Power's vision:** *To inspire communities to build sustainable food systems that are equitable and ecologically sound; creating a just world, one food-secure community at a time.*

Growing Power is a national nonprofit organization and land trust supporting people from diverse backgrounds, and the environments in which they live, by helping to provide equal access to healthy, high-quality, safe and affordable food. Growing Power provides hands-on training, outreach and technical assistance through the development of Community Food Systems that help people grow, process, market and distribute food in a sustainable manner.

## **Growing Food, Growing Minds, Growing Community.**

### **Growing Food** .....

To support the development and sustainability of community-based food systems through farmers' markets, local farmers, community gardens, school-based gardening and agricultural projects.

### **Growing Minds** .....

To offer hands-on training and technical assistance in sustainable agricultural techniques that can be implemented in urban or rural settings.

### **Growing Community** .....

To develop Community Food Centers - local places where people learn sustainable practices for growing, processing, marketing, and distributing food.

### **Growing Power** .....

Growing Power National Training and Community Food Center is based in Milwaukee, WI, with satellite offices in Chicago, IL, and Madison, WI. With six historic greenhouses, year-round hoop-houses, and farm animal pens supporting several agricultural functions - all organized within three acres of Milwaukee's last remaining farm within the city limits - Growing Power is the leader in integrated, diversified urban sustainable agriculture and a center of innovation, learning, and inspiration.



# good food **MANIFESTO**

**WILL ALLEN** | founder

**I am a farmer.** While I find that this has come to mean many other things to other people – that I have become also a trainer and teacher, and to some a sort of food philosopher – I do like nothing better than to get my hands into good, rich soil and sow the seeds of hope.

So, spring always enlivens me and gives me the energy to make haste, to feel confidence, to take full advantage of another all-too-short Wisconsin summer.

This spring, however, much more so than in past springs, I feel my hope and confidence mixed with a sense of greater urgency. This spring, I know that my work will be all the more important, for the simple but profound reason that more people are hungry.

For years I have argued that our food system is broken, and I have tried to teach what I believe must be done to fix it. This year, and last, we have begun seeing the unfortunate results of systemic breakdown. We have seen it in higher prices for those who can less afford to pay, in lines at local food pantries, churches and missions, and in the anxious eyes of people who have suddenly become unemployed. We have seen it, too, in nationwide outbreaks of food-borne illness in products as unlikely as spinach and peanuts.

Severe economic recession certainly has not helped matters, but the current economy is not alone to blame. This situation has been spinning toward this day for decades. And while many of my acquaintances tend to point the finger at the big agro-chemical conglomerates as villains, the fault really is with all of us who casually, willingly, even happily surrendered our rights to safe, wholesome, affordable and plentiful food in exchange for over-processed and pre-packaged convenience.

Over the past century, we allowed our agriculture to become more and more industrialized, more and more reliant on unsustainable practices, and much more distant from the source to the consumer. We have allowed corn and soybeans, grown on the finest farmland in the world, to become industrial commodities rather than foodstuffs. We have encouraged a system by which most of the green vegetables we eat come from a few hundred square miles of irrigated semi-desert in California.



When fuel prices skyrocket, as they did last year, things go awry. When a bubble like ethanol builds and then bursts, things go haywire. When drought strikes that valley in California, as is happening right now, things start to topple. And when the whole economy shatters, the security of a nation's food supply teeters on the brink of failure.

To many people, this might sound a bit hysterical. There is still food in the suburban supermarket aisles, yes. The shelves are not empty; there are no bread lines. We haven't read of any number of Americans actually starving to death.

No, and were any of those things to happen, you can rest assured that there would be swift and vigorous action. What is happening is that many vulnerable people, especially in the large cities where most of us live, in vast urban tracts where there are in fact no supermarkets, are being forced to buy cheaper and lower-quality foods, to forgo fresh fruits and vegetables, or are relying on food programs – including our children's school food programs – that by necessity are obliged to distribute any kind of food they can afford, good for you or not. And this is coming to haunt us in health care and social costs. No, we are not suddenly starving to death; we are slowly but surely malnourishing ourselves to death. And this fate is falling ever more heavily on those who were already stressed: the poor. Yet there is little action.



## good food **MANIFESTO** CONTINUED

Many astute and well-informed people beside myself, most notably Michael Pollan, in a highly persuasive treatise last fall in the New York Times, have issued these same warnings and laid out the case for reform of our national food policy. I need not go on repeating what Pollan and others have already said so well, and I do not wish merely to add my voice to a chorus.

I am writing to demand action.

It is time and past time for this nation, this government, to react to the dangers inherent in its flawed farm and food policies and to reverse course from subsidizing wealth to subsidizing health.

We have to stop paying the largest farm subsidies to large growers of unsustainable and inedible crops like cotton. We have to stop paying huge subsidies to Big Corn, Big Soy and Big Chem to use prime farmland to grow fuel, plastics and fructose. We have to stop using federal and state agencies and institutions as taxpayer-funded research arms for the very practices that got us into this mess.

We have to start subsidizing health and well-being by rewarding sustainable practices in agriculture and assuring a safe, adequate and wholesome food supply to all our citizens. And we need to start this reform process now, as part of the national stimulus toward economic recovery.

In my organization, Growing Power Inc. of Milwaukee, we have always before tried to be as self-sustaining as possible and to rely on the market for our success. Typically, I would not want to lean on government support, because part of the lesson we teach is to be self-reliant.

But these are not typical times, as we are now all too well aware.

As soon as it became clear that Congress would pass the National Recovery Act, I and members of my staff brainstormed ideas for a meaningful stimulus package aimed at creating green jobs, shoring up the security of our urban food systems, and promoting sound food policies of national scope. The outcome needed to be both “shovel-ready” for immediate impact and sustainable for future growth.

We produced a proposal for the creation of a public-private enabling institution called the Centers for Urban Agriculture. It would incorporate a national training and outreach center, a large working urban farmstead, a research and development center, a policy institute, and a state-of-the-future urban agriculture demonstration center into which all of these elements would be combined in a functioning community food system scaled to the needs of a large city.

We proposed that this working institution – not a “think tank” but a “do tank” – be based in Milwaukee, where Growing Power has already created an operating model on just two acres. But ultimately, satellite centers would become established in urban areas across the nation. Each would be the hub of a local or regional farm-to-market community food system that would provide sustainable jobs, job training, food production and food distribution to those most in need of nutritional support and security.

This proposal was forwarded in February to our highest officials at the city, state and federal level, and it was greeted with considerable approval. Unfortunately, however, it soon became clear that the way Congress had structured the stimulus package, with funds earmarked for only particular sectors of the economy, chiefly infrastructure, afforded neither our Congressional representatives nor our local leaders with the discretion to direct any significant funds to this innovative plan. It simply had not occurred to anyone that immediate and lasting job creation was plausible in a field such as community-based agriculture.

I am asking Congress today to rectify that oversight, whether by modifying the current guidelines of the Recovery Act or by designating new and dedicated funds to the development of community food systems through the creation of this national Centers for Urban Agriculture.

Our proposal budgeted the initial creation of this CUA at a minimum of \$63 million over two years – a droplet compared to the billions being invested in other programs both in the stimulus plan and from year-to-year in the federal budget.

Consider that the government will fund the Centers for Disease Control at about \$8.8 billion this year, and



## good food **MANIFESTO** CONTINUED

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that is above the hundreds of millions more in research grants to other bio-medical institutions, public and private. This is money well spent for important work to ensure Americans the best knowledge in protecting health by fighting disease; but surely by now we ought to recognize that the best offense against many diseases is the defense provided by a healthy and adequate diet. Yet barely a pittance of CDC money goes for any kind of preventive care research.

In 2008, the Department of Homeland Security approved spending \$450 million for a new National Bio and Agro-Defense Facility at Kansas State University, in addition to the existing Biosecurity Research Institute already there. Again, money well spent to protect our food supply from the potential of a terrorist attack. But note that these hundreds of millions are being spent to protect us from a threat that may never materialize, while we seem to trivialize the very real and material threat that is upon us right now: the threat of malnourishment and undernourishment of very significant number of our citizens.

Government programs under the overwhelmed and overburdened departments of Agriculture and of Health and Human Services do their best to serve their many masters, but in the end, government farm and food policies are most often at odds between the needs of the young, the old, the sick and the poor versus the wants of the super-industry that agriculture has become.

By and large, the government's funding of nutritional health comes down to spending millions on studies to tell us what we ought to eat without in any way guaranteeing that many people will be able to find or afford the foods they recommend. For instance, food stamps ensure only that poor people can buy food; they cannot ensure that, in the food deserts that America's inner cities have become, there will be any good food to buy.

We need a national nutrition plan that is not just another entitlement, that is not a matter of shipping surplus calories to schools, senior centers, and veterans' homes. We need a plan that encourages a return to the best practices of both farming and marketing, that rewards the grower who protects the environment

and his customers by nourishing his soil with compost instead of chemicals and who ships his goods the shortest distance, not the longest.

If the main purpose of government is to provide for the common security of its citizens, surely ensuring the security of their food system must be among its paramount duties. And if among our rights are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, we are denied all those rights if our cities become prisons of poverty and malnutrition.

As an African-American farmer, I am calling on the first African-American president of the United States to lead us quickly away from this deepening crisis. Demand, President Obama, that Congress and your own Administration begin without delay the process of reforming our farm and food policies. Start now by correcting the omission in your economic stimulus and recovery act that prevented significant spending on creating new and sustainable jobs for the poor in our urban centers as well as rural farm communities.

It will be an irony, certainly, but a sweet one, if millions of African-Americans whose grandparents left the farms of the South for the factories of the North, only to see those factories close, should now find fulfillment in learning once again to live close to the soil and to the food it gives to all of us.

I would hope that we can move along a continuum to make sure that all of citizens have access to the same fresh, safe, affordable good food regardless of their cultural, social or economic situation. **GP**





# areas of **EXPERTISE**

1. **Food Production and Distribution** – Making sure all people have access to good locally grown food is what spurred Will Allen to found Growing Power in the first place. This continues to drive all we do.
  - Distribution of over 400 Farm-to-City Market Baskets each week.
  - Management of the Rainbow Farmers Cooperative, a network of small family farmers using sustainable farming techniques.
  - Farm Fresh to MPS initiative which has already served fresh and locally grown healthy snacks to over 25,000 Milwaukee Public School students.
  - Management of Milwaukee's Southside Walker's Square and Mitchell St farmers markets, 10+ farm stands throughout Milwaukee, and presence in several farmers markets in Milwaukee and Chicago.
2. **Education Through Productive Demonstration** – All of Growing Power's training and education programs incorporate hands-on experiences with our environmentally friendly agricultural systems.
  - **Composting:** twenty million pounds of food waste is diverted from landfills annually and used as a renewable energy heating source and vermi-composted for natural fertilization.
  - **Aquaponics:** Our chemical-free aquaponic systems support over 100,000 tilapia and perch and grow edible crops within systems that recirculate and conserve water.
  - **Solar Energy:** We derive our energy from a 10.8 kW solar electric system and solar water heating system.
  - **Livestock:** We raise over 500 laying hens, a dairy goat herd, bees, ducks and turkeys.
3. **Youth Programs** – Our work and programming with youth is integral to our mission. Every day, Growing Power engages youth to learn, explore and lead.
  - Youth Corps – a year-round leadership skills training in Milwaukee and Chicago
  - Service learning, volunteer, and educational opportunities
4. **Training Programs** – Our training opportunities cater to individuals, businesses, schools, and organizations to develop their knowledge and skills in urban sustainable agriculture and community food systems.
  - *Growing Together: Community Food Systems "From the Ground Up"* – a monthly workshop providing hands-on training in community-based food projects.
  - *Commercial Urban Agriculture Training Course* – a five-month workshop series designed to "grow farmers," focusing on the business side of sustainable agriculture.
  - Three month internship – an intensive, full-time training program.
  - Year-long apprenticeship – a full-year of intense, hands-on urban farming training.
  - Accredited professional development training program (with Milwaukee-based Cardinal Stritch University) for teachers seeking training in urban agriculture.
  - Food Systems Specialist job training program – 12 months of full-time job training in developing and maintaining community-based food systems.
5. **Outreach: Local, National and International Community Food System Projects** – Growing Power is "growing." We are training the next generation of farmers and sustainable food systems leaders and workers worldwide, through outreach and partnerships.
  - Hundreds of acres committed to large, productive community and school gardens that also provide valuable youth and adult enrichment programming.
  - The Iron Street Urban Farm in Chicago – a seven acre Community Food Center based in an abandoned warehouse that will produce local, healthy and sustainable food year-round.
  - Collaborations with 15 other organizations from all over the country – from New York to Mississippi – to develop Regional Outreach Training Centers modeled off of Growing Power's successful food production systems and related programming.
6. **Policy and Environmental Change** – Growing Power has been a leader in countless groundbreaking environmental changes, on an organizational, local and national level.
  - First non-profit partner to secure long-term lease (20 years) with Milwaukee Public Schools to support a school garden
  - Host and fundraiser for Growing Food and Justice for All Initiative
  - Leadership and fiscal agency for the Chicago Food Policy Advisory Council





# 2008 MacArthur Fellows

INFORMATION AS OF SEPTEMBER 2008

**Will Allen is an urban farmer who is transforming the cultivation, production, and delivery of healthy foods to underserved, urban populations.**

In 1995, while assisting neighborhood children with a gardening project, Allen began developing the farming methods and educational programs that are now the hallmark of the non-profit organization Growing Power, which he directs and co-founded.

Guiding all is his efforts is the recognition that the unhealthy diets of low-income, urban populations, and such related health problems as obesity and diabetes, largely are attributable to limited access to safe and affordable fresh fruits and vegetables. Rather than embracing the “back to the land” approach promoted by many within the sustainable agriculture movement, Allen’s holistic farming model incorporates both cultivating foodstuffs and designing food distribution networks in an urban setting.

Through a novel synthesis of a variety of low-cost farming technologies – including use of raised beds, aquaculture, vermiculture, and heating greenhouses through composting – Growing Power produces vast amounts of food year-round at its main farming site, two acres of land located within Milwaukee’s city limits.

Recently, cultivation of produce and livestock has begun at other urban and rural sites in and around Milwaukee and Chicago. Over the last decade, Allen has expanded Growing Power’s initiatives through partnerships with local organizations and activities such as the Farm-City Market Basket Program, which provides a weekly basket of fresh produce grown by members of the Rainbow Farmer’s Cooperative to low-income urban residents at a reduced cost.

The internships and workshops hosted by Growing Power engage teenagers and young adults, often minorities and immigrants, in producing healthy foods for their communities and provide intensive, hands-on training to those interested in establishing similar farming initiatives in other urban settings. Through



these and other programs still in development, Allen is experimenting with new and creative ways to improve the diet and health of the urban poor.

Will Allen received a B.A. (1971) from the University of Miami. After a brief career in professional basketball and a number of years in corporate marketing at Procter and Gamble, he returned to his roots as a farmer. He has served as the founder and CEO of Growing Power, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, since 1995 and has taught workshops to aspiring urban farmers across the United States and abroad.

VAN JONES | TIME magazine | May 10, 2010

## Will Allen



At one time, the term urban farm sounded like an oxymoron. No longer.

A new movement is sprouting up in America's low-income neighborhoods. Some urban residents, sick of fast food and the scarcity of grocery stores, have decided to grow good food for themselves.

One of the movement's (literally) towering icons is Will Allen, 62, of Milwaukee's Growing Power Inc. His main 2-acre Community Food Center is no larger than a small supermarket. But it houses 20,000 plants and vegetables, thousands of fish, plus chickens, goats, ducks, rabbits and bees.



People come from around the world to marvel — and to learn. Says Allen: "Everybody, regardless of their economic means, should have access to the same healthy, safe, affordable food that is grown naturally."

The movement's aim is not just healthier people but a healthier planet. Food grown in cities is trucked shorter distances. Translation: more greenhouses in the 'hood equals less greenhouse gas in the air.

Just as important, farm projects grow communities and nourish hope. The best ones will produce more leaders like Allen, with his credo "Grow. Bloom. Thrive." **GP**

Van Jones, founder of Green for All, is a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress.





# street farmer

ELIZABETH ROYTE | NYTimes Magazine | PUBLISHED: JULY 1, 2009

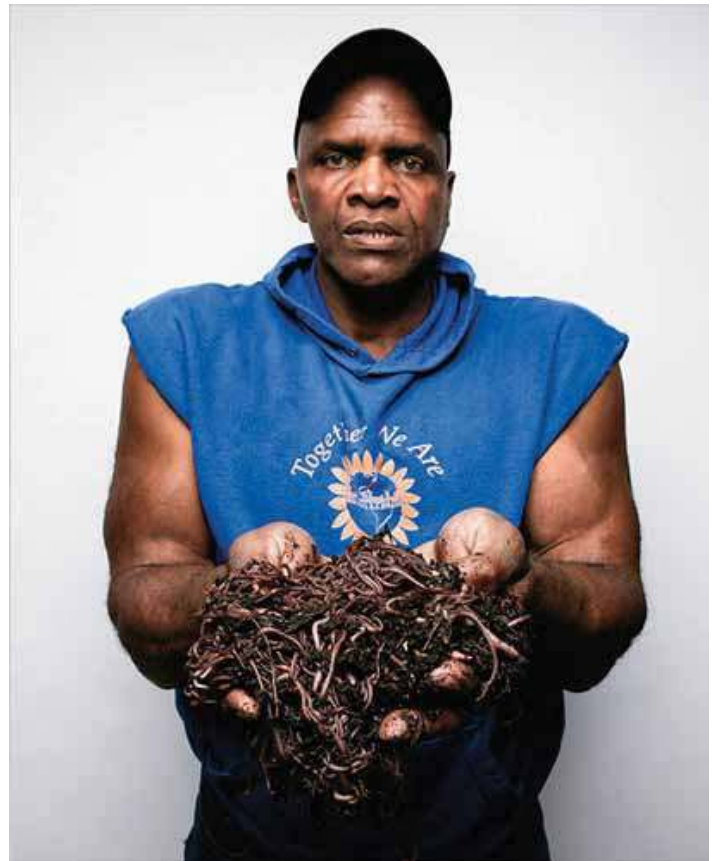
**Will Allen, a farmer of Bunyonesque proportions, ascended a berm of wood chips and brewer’s mash and gently probed it with a pitchfork.**

“Look at this,” he said, pleased with the treasure he unearthed. A writhing mass of red worms dangled from his tines. He bent over, raked another section with his fingers and palmed a few beauties.

It was one of those April days in Wisconsin when the weather shifts abruptly from hot to cold, and Allen, dressed in a sleeveless hoodie — his daily uniform down to 20 degrees, below which he adds another sweatshirt — was exactly where he wanted to be. Show Allen a pile of soil, fully composted or still slimy with banana peels, and he’s compelled to scoop some into his melon-size hands. “Creating soil from waste is what I enjoy most,” he said. “Anyone can grow food.”

Like others in the so-called good-food movement, Allen, who is 60, asserts that our industrial food system is depleting soil, poisoning water, gobbling fossil fuels and stuffing us with bad calories. Like others, he advocates eating locally grown food. But to Allen, local doesn’t mean a rolling pasture or even a suburban garden: it means 14 greenhouses crammed onto two acres in a working-class neighborhood on Milwaukee’s northwest side, less than half a mile from the city’s largest public-housing project.

And this is why Allen is so fond of his worms. When you’re producing a quarter of a million dollars’ worth of food in such a small space, soil fertility is everything. Without microbe- and nutrient-rich worm castings (poop, that is), Allen’s Growing Power farm couldn’t provide healthful food to 10,000 urbanites — through his on-farm retail store, in schools and restaurants, at farmers’ markets and in low-cost market baskets delivered to neighborhood pickup points. He couldn’t employ scores of people, some from the nearby housing project; continually train farmers in intensive polyculture; or convert millions of pounds of food waste into a version of black gold.



## street farmer CONTINUED

With seeds planted at quadruple density and nearly every inch of space maximized to generate exceptional bounty, Growing Power is an agricultural Mumbai, a supercity of upward-thrusting tendrils and duct-taped infrastructure. Allen pointed to five tiers of planters brimming with salad greens. “We’re growing in 25,000 pots,” he said. Ducking his 6-foot-7 frame under one of them, he pussyfooted down a leaf-crammed aisle. “We grow a thousand trays of sprouts a week; every square foot brings in \$30.” He headed toward the in-ground fish tanks stocked with tens of thousands of tilapia and perch. Pumps send the dirty fish water up into beds of watercress, which filter pollutants and trickle the cleaner water back down to the fish — a symbiotic system called aquaponics. The watercress sells for \$16 a pound; the fish fetch \$6 apiece.

Onward through the hoop houses: rows of beets and chard. Out back: chickens, ducks, heritage turkeys, goats, beehives. While Allen narrated, I nibbled the scenery — spinach, arugula, cilantro.

If inside the greenhouse was Eden, outdoors was, as Allen explained on a drive through the neighborhood, “a food desert.” Scanning the liquor stores in the strip malls, he noted: “From the housing project, it’s more than three miles to the Pick’n Save. That’s a long way to go for groceries if you don’t have a car or can’t carry stuff. And the quality of the produce can be poor.” Fast-food joints and convenience stores selling highly processed, high-calorie foods, on the other hand, were locally abundant. “It’s a form of redlining,” Allen said. “We’ve got to change the system so everyone has safe, equitable access to healthy food.”

Propelled by alarming rates of diabetes, heart disease and obesity, by food-safety scares and rising awareness of industrial agriculture’s environmental footprint, the food movement seems finally to have met its moment. First Lady Michelle Obama and Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack have planted organic vegetable gardens. Roof gardens are sprouting nationwide. Community gardens have waiting lists. Seed houses and canning suppliers are oversold.

Allen, too, has achieved a certain momentum for

his efforts to bring the good-food movement to the inner city. In the last several years, he has become a darling of the foundation world. In 2005, he received a \$100,000 Ford Foundation leadership grant. In 2008, the MacArthur Foundation honored Allen with a \$500,000 “genius” award. And in May, the Kellogg Foundation gave Allen \$400,000 to create jobs in urban agriculture.

Today Allen is the go-to expert on urban farming, and there is a hunger for his knowledge. When I visited Growing Power, Allen was conducting a two-day workshop for 40 people: each paid \$325 to learn worm composting, aquaponics construction and other farm skills. “We need 50 million more people growing food,” Allen told them, “on porches, in pots, in side yards.” The reasons are simple: as oil prices rise, cities expand and housing developments replace farmland, the ability to grow more food in less space becomes ever more important. As Allen can’t help reminding us, with a mischievous smile, “Chicago has 77,000 vacant lots.”

Allen led the composting group to a pair of wooden bins and instructed his students to load them with hay. “O.K., you’ve got your carbon,” he said. “Where are you going to get your nitrogen?”

“Food waste,” a young man offered, wiping his brow. Allen pointed him toward a mound of expired asparagus collected from a wholesaler. As the participants layered the materials in a bin, Allen drilled them: “How much of that food is solid versus water weight?” “Why do we water the compost?” The farmers in training hung on every word.

If Allen at times seems a bit weary — he recites his talking points countless times a day — he comes alive when he’s digging, seeding and watering. His body straightens, and his face brightens. “Sitting in my office isn’t a very comfortable thing for me,” he told me later, seated in his office. “I want to be out there doing physical stuff.”

Which includes basic research. Warned by experts that his red wigglers would freeze during Milwaukee’s long winter, Allen studied the worms for five years, learning their food and shelter preferences. “I’d run my experiments over and over



## street farmer CONTINUED

and over — just like an athlete operates.” Then he worked out systems for procuring wood chips from the city and food scraps from markets and wholesalers. Last year, he took in six million pounds of spoiled food, which would otherwise rot in landfills and generate methane, a potent greenhouse gas. Every four months, he creates another 100,000 pounds of compost, of which he uses a quarter and sells the rest.

Uncannily, Allen makes such efforts sound simple — fun even. When he mentions that animal waste attracts soldier flies, whose larvae make terrific fish and chicken feed, a dozen people start imagining that growing grubs in buckets of manure might be a good project for them too. “Will has a way of persuading people to do things,” Robert Pierce, a farmer in Madison, Wis., told me. “There’s a spirit in how he says things; you want to be part of his community.”

Allen owes part of his Pied Piper success to his striking physicality and part to his athlete’s confidence — he’s easeful in his skin and, when not barking about nitrogen ratios, incongruously gentle. He told me about his life one afternoon as we drove in his truck, which was sticky with soda and dusted with doughnut powder, to Merton, a suburb of Milwaukee where Growing Power leases a 30-acre plot. “My father was a sharecropper in South Carolina,” Allen said. “He was the eldest boy of 13 children, and he never learned to read.” In the 1930s, he moved near Bethesda, Md. “My mother did domestic work, and my father worked as a construction laborer. But he rented a small plot to farm.”

A talented athlete, Allen wasn’t allowed to practice sports until he finished his farm chores. “I had to be in bed early, and I thought, There’s got to be something better than this.” For a while, there was. Allen accepted a basketball scholarship from the University of Miami. There, he married his college sweetheart, Cyndy Bussler. After graduating, he played professionally, briefly in the American Basketball Association in Florida and then for a few seasons in Belgium. In his free time, Allen would drive around the countryside, where he couldn’t help noticing the compost piles.

“I started hanging out with Belgian farmers,” Allen said. “I saw how they did natural farming,” much as his father had. Something clicked in his mind. He asked his team’s management, which provided housing for players, if he could have a place with a garden. Soon he had 25 chickens and was growing the familiar foods of his youth — peas, beans, peanuts — outside Antwerp. “I just had to do it,” he said. “It made me happy to touch the soil.” On holidays, he cooked feasts for his teammates. He gave away a lot of eggs.

After retiring from basketball in 1977, when he was 28, Allen settled with his wife and three children in Oak Creek, just south of Milwaukee, where Cyndy’s family owned some farmland. “No one was using that land, but I had the bug to grow food,” Allen said. As his father did, Allen insisted that his children contribute to the household income. “We went right to the field at the end of the school day and during summer breaks,” recalled his daughter, Erika Allen, who now runs Growing Power’s satellite office in Chicago. “And let’s be clear: This was farm labor, not chores.”

Allen grew food for his family and sold the excess at Milwaukee’s farmers’ markets and in stores. Meanwhile, he worked as a district manager for Kentucky Fried Chicken, where he won sales awards. “It was just a job,” he said. “I was aware it wasn’t the greatest food, but I also knew that people didn’t have a lot of choice about where to eat: there were no sit-down restaurants in that part of the city.”

In 1987, Allen took a job with Procter & Gamble, where he won a marketing award for selling paper goods to supermarkets. “The job was so easy I could do it in half a day,” he says now. That left more time to grow food. By now, Allen was sharing his land with Hmong farmers, with whom he felt some kinship after concluding that white shoppers were spurning their produce at the farmers’ market. Allen was also donating food to a local food pantry. “I didn’t like the idea of people eating all that canned food, that salty stuff.” When he brought in his greens, he said, “it was the No. 1 item selected off that carousel — it was like you couldn’t keep them in.”

## street farmer CONTINUED

After a restructuring in 1993, P&G shifted Allen to analyzing which products sold best in supermarkets. He was good at that too: “I won sales awards six times in one year.”

Driving across his Merton field, Allen smiled. Suddenly, I got it: Allen was a genius at selling — fried chicken, Pampers, arugula, red wrigglers, you name it. He could push his greens into corporate cafeterias, persuade the governor to help finance the construction of an anaerobic digester, wheedle new composting sites from urban landlords, persuade Milwaukee’s school board to buy his produce for its public schools and charm the blind into growing sprouts. (“I was cutting sprouts in the dark one night,” Allen said, “and I realized you don’t need sight to do this.”)

After parking his truck at the field’s edge, Allen made an arthritic beeline for a mound of compost. “Oh, this is good,” he said, digging in with his hands. “Unbelievable.” He saluted a few volunteers, whom he had appointed to pluck shreds of plastic from the compost under the hot noonday sun. He turned to scan the field, dotted with large farm-unfriendly rocks.

The rocks gave me pause: didn’t millions of Americans leave farms for good reason? The work is hard, nature can be cruel and the pay is low; most small farmers work off-farm to make ends meet. The appeal of such labor to people already working low-wage, long-hour jobs — the urban dwellers Allen most wants to reach — is not immediately apparent. And there is something almost fanciful in exhorting a person to grow food when he lives in an apartment or doesn’t have a landlord’s permission to garden on the roof or in an empty lot.

“Not everyone can grow food,” Allen acknowledged. But he offers other ways of engaging with the soil: “You bring 30 people out here, bring the kids and give them good food,” he said, “and picking up those rocks is a community event.”

Of course, if rock picking or worm tending — either here or in a community garden — doesn’t attract his Milwaukee neighbors, it’s easy enough for them to order a market basket or shop at his retail store,

which happens to sell fried pork skin as well as collard greens. “Culturally appropriate foods,” Allen calls them. And the doughnuts in his truck? “I’m no purist about food, and I don’t ask anyone else to be,” he said, laughing. “I work 17 hours a day; sometimes I need some sugar!”

This nondogmatic approach may be one of Allen’s most appealing qualities. His essential view is that people do the best they can: if they don’t have any better food choices than KFC, well, O.K. But let’s work on changing that. If they don’t know what to do with okra, Growing Power stands ready to help. And if their great-grandparents were sharecroppers and they have some bad feelings about the farming life, then Allen has something to offer there too: his personal example and workshops geared toward empowering minorities. “African-Americans need more help, and they’re often harder to work with because they’ve been abused and so forth,” Allen said. “But I can break through a lot of that very quickly because a lot of people of color are so proud, so happy to see me leading this kind of movement.”

If there’s no place in the food movement for low- and middle-income people of all races, says Tom Philpott, food editor of *Grist.org* and co-founder of the North Carolina-based *Maverick Farms*, “we’ve got big problems, because the critics will be proven right — that this is a consumption club for people who’ve traveled to Europe and tasted fine food.”

In 1993, Allen, looking to grow indoors during the winter and to sell food closer to the city, bought the Growing Power property, a derelict plant nursery in foreclosure. He had no master plan. “I told the city I’d hire kids and teach them about food systems,” he said. Before long, community and school groups were asking for his help starting gardens. He rarely said no. But after years of laboring on his own and beginning to feel burned out, he agreed to partner with Heifer International, the sustainable-agriculture charity. “They were looking for youth to do urban ag. When they learned I had kids and that I had land, their eyes lit up.” Heifer taught Allen fish and worms, and together they expanded their training programs.

## street farmer CONTINUED

Employing locals to grow food for the hungry on neglected land has an irresistible appeal, but it's not clear yet whether Growing Power's model can work elsewhere. "I know how to make money growing food," Allen asserts. But he's also got between 30 and 50 employees to pay, which makes those foundation grants — and a grant-writer — essential. Growing Power also relies on large numbers of volunteers. All of which perhaps explains why other urban farmers have not yet replicated Growing Power's scale or its unique social achievements.

So no, Growing Power isn't self-sufficient. But neither is industrial agriculture, which relies on price supports and government subsidies. Moreover, industrial farming incurs costs that are paid by society as a whole: the health costs of eating highly processed foods, for example, or water pollution. Nor can Growing Power be compared to other small farms, because it provides so many intangible social benefits to those it reaches. "It's not operated as a farm," said Ian Marvy, executive director of Brooklyn's Added Value farm, which shares many of Growing Power's core values but produces less food. "It has a social, ecological and economic bottom line." That said, Marvy says that anyone can replicate Allen's technical systems — the worm composting and aquaponics — for relatively little money.

Finished with his business in Merton, Allen sang out his truck window to his plastic-picking volunteers, "Don't y'all work too hard now." The future farmers laughed. Allen predicts that because of high unemployment and the recent food scares, 10 million people will plant gardens for the first time this year. But two million of them will eventually drop out, he said, when the potato bugs arrive or the rain doesn't cooperate. Still, he was sanguine. "The experience will introduce those folks to what a tomato really tastes like, so next time they'll buy one at their green market. And when we talk about farm-worker rights, we'll have more advocates for them."

At a red light on Silver Spring Drive, Allen stopped and eyed the construction equipment beached in front of a dealership. "Look at that front-end loader," he said admiringly. "That thing isn't going to sell." He shook his head and added: "Maybe we can work something out with them. We could make some nice compost with that." **GP**







# making fresh food affordable

KAREN CULLOTTA | Oprah Magazine | AUGUST 2009 ISSUE

## Milwaukee's Will Allen is on a mission: to raise affordable fresh food for people in the inner city.

For urban farmer Will Allen, unearthing a clump of loamy dirt laced with a tangle of baby worms is a moment to be cherished.

"This is the most fertile soil on Earth," says Allen, 60, holding out his wriggling treasure on a recent Sunday at Growing Power, the three-acre nonprofit farm he established in 1995 in Milwaukee. Allen, a 2008 winner of a MacArthur Fellowship, and his team of 35 full-time employees and 1,000 volunteers use sustainable agricultural practices to grow 159 kinds of fruits, vegetables, and edible flowers. They also raise honeybees, fish, poultry, sheep, and goats. The bounty is sold at farmers' markets, bundled into low-cost baskets for local families, and served at local restaurants.

Allen is at the forefront of a burgeoning movement to replace huge industrialized food systems with smaller sustainable agricultural practices. It's a far cry from what he imagined as a child, growing up on a farm in Rockville, Maryland. After earning a basketball scholarship to the University of Miami, Allen played pro ball in Florida and Belgium before embarking on a career in marketing. In 1995, after helping low-income kids with an organic gardening project, he decided to make it his mission to bring affordable healthy foods to families in poor city neighborhoods. Fourteen years later, he shares his agrarian philosophies with about 10,000 visitors a year. In a recent essay ([GrowingPower.Wordpress.com](http://GrowingPower.Wordpress.com)), Allen writes: "It will be an irony, certainly, but a sweet one, if millions of African-Americans whose grandparents left the farms of the South for the factories of the North, only to see those factories close, should now find fulfillment in learning once again to live close to the soil and to the food it gives to all of us." **GP**



Photo: © 2009 Jupiterimages Corporation





## EXPERT ADVICE FROM the urban farmer

David Kaufman | Bon Appetit | June 2010

The son of a South Carolina sharecropper, 60-year-old Allen is founder of the Milwaukee-based nonprofit Growing Power, which has become a model for city-center agriculture. Allen planted his first garden in the early 1970s, during a stint playing pro basketball in Belgium, where he fed his fellow players. Today, Growing Power feeds 10,000 people annually from its two-acre Milwaukee farm, a country farm in nearby Merton, and a Chicago office run by Allen's daughter Erika. Armed with hundreds of volunteers, thousands of plants, and a whole lot of worms, Allen is bringing new life to the country's urban centers.

### Why do you think urban gardening is so popular now?

Historically, almost everyone did garden at home—perhaps on a patio or in a backyard. So there's nothing new about urban farming; we're simply resurrecting a longtime trend.

### You “grow” your own soil. Why and how do you do this?

City soil is contaminated with lead and arsenic and a whole spectrum of bad things. We “grew” six to eight million pounds of soil last year by composting the waste materials of everyday urban life: coffee grinds, leftover barley from breweries, wood chips from factories.

### Does being African-American in the primarily white arena of agricultural reform matter?

Absolutely! The people hit hardest by the current food system are usually people of color—but even a decade ago, farming carried a stigma in these communities. There were memories of sharecropping, like in my own family. Today, folks are jumping onto the “good food” revolution, and it's crucial they see faces that look like their own. The work that authors like Michael Pollan have done is invaluable. But it's essential that this movement be truly multi-cultural.



### And multi-generational?

Kids are the key to improving the “food system.” Children inherently know what good food looks like, tastes like—even if they don't have access to it. So kids can learn at our farms, and then share their experiences back at home. **GP**



## How is this man changing the way the world grows food?

Joel McNally | Milwaukee Magazine | April 2010

The sour smell of decomposing coffee grounds and beer hops hangs heavily in the air. Food waste of all kinds is piled high in wooden bins and turning slowly into good earth. During the coldest winter days, the temperature at the center of the 4-foot-high piles of compost can reach 150 degrees, enough to heat the entire greenhouse where the compost is housed. And at the center of the entire dirt-making process are the worms.

Red wigglers. Hard-working worms who eat their weight every day, quadruple their population in four months, and are the key “employees,” as Will Allen lovingly puts it, of Growing Power, the 2-acre urban farm on 55th Street and Silver Spring Drive that he started in 1993.

Allen’s worms spend much of their time outside in expansive “worm nurseries.” Once fully grown, they’re moved to large wooden bins inside – the air thick and dewy from radiating piles of compost – where their “castings” or waste is collected and used as an all-natural fertilizer and pesticide.

This “worm tea” (watered-down worm waste) provides continuous enrichment to Growing Power’s extremely rich, home-grown soil, but can also be used to remediate contaminated soil in industrially poisoned urban neighborhoods. Worms break down toxins in their bodies and leave behind fertile, nutrient-rich soil. “It’s the kind of dirt that makes you wish you were a worm,” quips one Growing Power employee.

The inspiration for this enterprise arose in 1995. Allen – all 6-foot-7, 270 pounds of him – was showing schoolchildren from Neighborhood House how worms break down food scraps. With 30 pounds of red wigglers from Heifer International, Allen taught the kids how to care for and feed the worms. However, many were overfed and died. This got him thinking: What are the optimal conditions for worms to break down refuse? He spent the next five years experimenting.

“I became kind of passionate about this,” Allen says. “Today, if you drop me off anywhere in the world with a handful of worms, I can build you as big a food production system as you want.”

The millions of worms the 61-year-old uses in every one of his agricultural projects all came from that original school project.



His innovations in food production have won him international acclaim. In 2008, Allen became the only Milwaukeean to win the so-called “genius grant” of \$500,000 from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Allen was one of the experts invited to advise President Barack Obama’s transition team on agricultural policy. And last September, at the annual meeting of Bill Clinton’s Global Initiative, Clinton announced his backing for a \$1.9 million project to send Will to South Africa and Zimbabwe to build local food systems.

Allen’s urban agricultural innovations have transformed

Growing Power into a national training center for activists in the community food movement, a research institution to create food production models that can be exported internationally, and, most recently, a pioneer in alternative energy production testing a process to convert food waste into methane gas to produce electricity.

Will’s genius for seeing such connections has him raising perch and tilapia for area restaurants in the same water used to grow vegetables. The greens keep the water sparkling clean, while waste from the fish provides nutrients for the plants. It’s a completely natural, self-contained system, and Will travels the world teaching others how to replicate it.

“This guy’s my hero,” said Clinton, introducing Allen on stage in New York. As for Allen’s approach to agriculture, the former president added, “It can change America’s relationship with people all over the world.”

## How is this man changing the way the world grows food? CONTINUED

### HOOP DREAMS

Growing up in Bethesda, Md., farming was the last thing Will allen imagined himself doing. He wanted to play basketball.

He was just 13 - but well on his way to 6-foot-7 - and he and some friends had summer jobs working at a swimming pool at American University in Washington, D.C. The pool was right next to the gym where college basketball players in summer schoool would play every afternoon.

“Physically, I was like a man,” Allen says. “When Jim Williams, the American University basketball coach, saw how big I was, he saw me as a recruit. The job at the swimming pool was more like a shadow job. Every afternoon, I used to go over and play basketball with the college guys.”

When Allen started high school in Rockville, Md., nobody knew who he was. But after showing off his dunking ability during junior varsity tryouts, he was quickly sent over to the varsity gym. “The coach put a couple of big centers on me, seniors. I just destroyed those guys,” Allen says. “I had been playing against college guys. I could really jump and run.”

Allen was the first player ever to be named All-Metropolitan, one of the top 10 high school players in the D.C. area, three years in a row. He led Rockville to a state championship and received more than 100 scholarship offers. He ultimately accepted an offer from the University of Miami, becoming its first African-American basketball player in 1967.

Every black athlete who integrated Southern sports programs in the '60s has horror stories to tell. Allen remembers being greeted by monkey chants when the team played the University of Florida. Members of the crowd would try to spit on him when he ran onto the floor against the University of Alabama. There were death threats in letters signed “KKK” saying: “Go back home, nigger.”

Allen wasn't looking to make history. He says he chose the University of Miami mostly because of the weather and because St. Bonaventure, another final choice, had only 200 girls in the whole school.

Miami coach Bruce Hale, who recruited Allen, was the father-in-law of pro basketball star Rick Barry, who had

played at Miami. Unfortunately, after Allen signed, Hale left Miami to coach Barry's team, the Oakland Oaks of the American Basketball Association. That was just the beginning of a series of souring developments.

Because freshmen didn't play varsity in those days, Allen's college playing experience at Miami started his sophomore year in 1968. The frustrations mounted. The university never got around to building a playing facility on campus or hiring a strong coach to succeed Hale. The team played at the Miami convention center and other remote venues. At one point, the university even considered moving games to a high school gym.

Then, just before Allen's senior year, when it was too late for him to transfer, the university announced it was considering dropping basketball. Allen, who'd helped recruit athletes from the D.C. area, felt responsible for them.

“We called a press conference,” Allen says. “Here I was, a 22-year-old kid in front of a microphone. We announced we were going on strike. We didn't know what we were doing, but we got national attention and forced the university's hand. They announced we would play one more season before they dropped the program.”

It was a terrible season, one Allen is certain hurt his draft status. Despite being the Hurricanes' leading scorer in 1970-71, he was drafted in the fourth round (60th overall) of the 1971 NBA draft by the Baltimore Bullets. He fell all the way to the 12th round of the competing ABA draft, where he was finally selected by the Miami Floridians.

Before the NBA season even started, Allen was the cut by the Bullets. He was picked up by the Floridians, but after he played in just seven games, the team folded. Allen ultimately ended up in Europe, playing for several teams in Belgium.

Ric Cobb, the Marquette University star who played for Al McGuire and later coached the UWM Panthers, vividly remembers Allen's style: “We played against each other in the top league in Belgium,” Cobb says. “Will was definitely one of the top 10 players in the country. He could really dominate the paint inside. Whenever he guarded me, he always beat me up. We had good games against each other, but I always felt a little sore afterwards.”

## How is this man changing the way the world grows food?

CONTINUED

Around age 27, Will developed thyroid cancer. He had two operations back in the U.S. to remove his thyroid gland. Though he made a full recovery, his basketball career was over.

It would take almost four decades, but Allen's basketball achievements finally received their due. In March, he was singled out as one of the finest players in the history of the country's most storied league, getting honored as one of the Legends of the Atlantic Coast Conference.

Allen ranks second in career rebounds at Miami behind NBA Hall of Famer Rick Barry and ranks 17th in career points. His total of 28 20-point games is tied for 10th-most in school history.

"It's very satisfying from the standpoint of the struggles the program at Miami went through. I had a pretty good career despite all the sideshow stuff," Will says. "I consider it quite an honor."

### THE ACCIDENTAL FARMER

O.W. Allen was a powerfully built man who couldn't write his own name and worked as a sharecropper in South Carolina in the 1930s. He would cultivate fields by hand with a mule-driven two-handled plow. And sometimes, after the harvest, he would be told by the white owner that he hadn't earned any money.

"Imagine working a full farm season and then being told you weren't going to get any money," Will Allen says. The only way many sharecroppers survived was on the little food they managed to grow for themselves.

Allen calls his father "one of the smartest people I ever met." By the time Will and his brothers were born, O.W. and their mother, Willie Mae, had moved to the Washington, D.C., area, where O.W. worked construction. The family lived on a large Bethesda estate out in the country owned by a Canadian research scientist who worked for the National Institutes of Health, a man Allen's family knew as Dr. Frank.

"Dr. Frank's son also was a research scientist at NIH," Will says. "And there was an apartment in the main house where some scientist from a foreign country was always living. Here was this African-American family

living on a large estate in Maryland being exposed to people from Japan, India, Sweden."

Their mother worked as a domestic on the estate and, in between construction jobs, Allen's father farmed the land with the help of his three sons.

"My father wanted us to learn how to grow food, to learn life skills through farming," Allen says. But he couldn't see the value.

"When I left the farm at 18, I said never again will I do this hard work," Allen recalls. "But in Europe, I had a Belgian teammate who had some relatives with a farm. I went out there and I helped them plant potatoes. All of a sudden, I realized I missed this.

"I started hanging out with some Belgian farmers because they farmed the same way my family did. You didn't use any chemicals. You took care of the land. I had this hidden passion, I guess. The last team I played for in Lier, I asked the owner to get me a house out in the country. I got 25 chickens. I got some plants and seed and planted a big garden."

During the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays, Will would invite other American players over for big feasts, as many as 20 players with their wives or girlfriends.

"I'm from New York," Cobb says, "so I was kind of surprised when I went to his house. Here's a 6-foot-7 professional athlete raising chickens and vegetables in Europe."

"My family never had a car or a television," Allen says, "but we always had tons of food. That's one of the joys of life, being able to share food with folks."

When Allen returned from Europe and settled in Oak Creek in the '70s, the future guru of healthy, homegrown food went to work for the Marcus Corp. – ironically, he admits now – managing Kentucky Fried Chicken outlets in Milwaukee's inner city.

But the farming bug continued to gnaw at him. Allen grew vegetables on his in-laws' land for his own family and to sell at farmers' markets. But just as at Miami, he had to break down racial barriers to succeed, this time at the Fondy Farmers Market.

At the time, though the market was in the central city, all of the stalls were taken by white farmers. Allen was at the top of a waiting list to get a stall whenever one opened up. But after the death of a farmer, Allen saw



## How is this man changing the way the world grows food? CONTINUED

the farmer's family pass his stall along to a white farmer from Racine in a private transaction. Allen protested to the city. As a consolation, the city allowed him to set up outside the market until there was another opening. "We had to set up across the street," Allen's son Jason recalls. "That always troubled him."

After he finally got a stall in Fondy Market proper, Allen says, "an incredible thing happened." The city decided to stop subsidizing the market; they wanted to bring in a private operator. By now, Will had become friends with many of the other farmers who feared the change would lead to higher rents. They came to Allen to see if he could organize opposition in the black community to stop privatization.

Allen came up with the idea of the farmers forming a cooperative to run the market themselves. He secured a grant to hire an executive director and then was elected president of the Fondy Farmers Market - where Allen was originally not welcome.

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"That's kind of the way I've always broken down discriminatory practices," he says. "I try to find a way to get over them, around them, underneath, whatever."

About 10 years after the first cancer scare, Allen developed another tumor in his salivary gland. That required more surgery and radiation treatment. He has been cancer-free since.

"It's something you think about every day," Allen says. "I try not to focus on it. I don't even tell anybody I'm a cancer survivor." But it might have added some urgency to what had increasingly become his life's mission of connecting farming to the city.

In 1993, Allen was working in marketing for Proctor & Gamble. Driving down Silver Spring Drive, he saw a "For Sale" sign on what turned out to be the last plot of city land zoned for farming. The city of Milwaukee had acquired the land for unpaid taxes from a florist.

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A religious congregation was eager to acquire the land and build a church. Don Richards, the alderman for the area, promised the minister he would support the church once the zoning expired.

"Fortunately, I can say now, before the zoning ran out, the Department of City Development came to me and said, 'There's this truck farmer from Oak Creek who wants to buy the place,' " Richards says. "I would never tell the reverend, but I think more religious activity of a general nature goes on at Growing Power than would have in a church. And that's speaking as a former clergyman."

Allen had a powerful vision of an urban farm providing healthy food, education and jobs to an underserved community. He actually considered it an asset to be near Westlawn, the city's largest public housing project, which he now serves with a weekly "Market Basket" of fresh fruits and vegetables for \$16.

There would be an occasional confused goat in traffic and a few early complaints from neighbors startled to be awakened by roosters, Richards recalls. "I thought, 'God, what a joy to be living in the city and have roosters waking you up.' "

But Richards didn't have to worry long about objections. Will invited anyone who complained to come see what he was doing. "After that, I never got another complaint."

## NATIONAL ATTENTION

Jerry Kaufman, professor emeritus in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at UW-Madison, is sometimes described as the father of urban food planning. He was one of the first to propose turning abandoned industrial land in Northern cities back to agriculture.

## How is this man changing the way the world grows food? CONTINUED

Kaufman jokes that he got to know Allen by speaking Dutch. They met around 2000 when both were advising a nonprofit organization building community gardens in Madison. Kaufman had just returned from studying farms in the Netherlands. Allen told him he had lived in northern Belgium and knew some Flemish. The two started trading Dutch phrases.

About a year later, Allen invited Kaufman to join the board of Growing Power. Kaufman has been board president since 2003. It was the start of Allen making connections to university planning experts and food research scientists.

Kaufman says Allen takes scientific ideas from around the country and incorporates them at Growing Power. Allen is demonstrating how locally produced food can eliminate enormous distribution and transportation costs and give growers a bigger return. Normally, farmers receive a meager 20 cents of every food dollar from corporate agriculture.

The mission of Growing Power sometimes sounds like spreading thousands of Davids around the country to bring down the Goliath of Big Ag, the multibillion-dollar corporate agriculture system Allen says has failed both farmers and consumers.

“They can’t really compete at our level,” contends Allen’s daughter Erika, who manages a number of Growing Power projects in Chicago. “They can try to market their product a certain way and change some of their language, but as far as implementing local projects, that’s where we have the edge. I hope they try, though, because they would have to transform the way they operate, which would be good for everybody.”

As Growing Power’s reputation spread, Allen secured a \$100,000 Ford Foundation grant in 2005. Even more doors opened after Allen won the MacArthur Foundation’s \$500,000 “genius grant” in September 2008.

It was early last year that Allen met Clinton at a university conference in Austin, Texas, sponsored by the Clinton Global Initiative.

On a world hunger panel, Allen ended up debating a university president with Wall Street connections who was arguing for exporting biotechnology to Africa. “We’ve already tried that,” Allen responded, “and we’ve got more hunger than ever before.” Instead of trying to

impose advanced technologies, why not teach Africans to create local food systems that would allow them to control their own communities and lives, Allen argued.

After the program, Allen was invited to join Clinton and about 30 of his friends for dinner at a local restaurant. Clinton introduced himself to Allen saying: “Hill and I have been following your career for a long time.”

A couple of months later, Allen got a call inviting him to appear on a panel at the annual meeting of Clinton’s Global Initiative in New York. As the conference approached, he got another call asking if he would like to submit a proposal to be funded as a Clinton initiative.

Allen described a project he’d been discussing with an international team to export Growing Power’s food production models to South Africa and Zimbabwe and to bring Africans to Milwaukee for training. The Clinton staff was enthusiastic. The catch: Allen had only 24 hours to write a proposal for the \$1.9 million, five-year project. But he got it done.

The Clinton Global Initiative didn’t actually provide the money, but gave Allen access to 300 international funders that otherwise would be out of reach for a nonprofit agency from Milwaukee.

Meanwhile, Allen has been discovered by the national press. A glowing profile in *The New York Times Magazine* last July hailed him as “the go-to expert on urban farming.” *Ebony* magazine named Allen, along with President Obama and U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder, as African-Americans belonging to “The Power 150: Change Agents We Can Believe In.” In February, Allen was one of three speakers sharing the podium with First Lady Michelle Obama when she announced a national initiative to fight childhood obesity.

As Allen’s fame grows, so does his ability to raise money to turn his visions into reality. Within two years, Growing Power expects to raise \$10 million to build what he calls “the first vertical farm in the country.”

It would be a five-story, mostly glass-enclosed building at the Silver Spring site, growing food on every floor. The ground floor would include a modern retail store to replace the rustic farmers’ market. For the workshops and training sessions that now attract students from around the world, the structure would include classrooms, meeting rooms and a teaching kitchen.

## How is this man changing the way the world grows food? CONTINUED

### A BIRACIAL FAMILY

One of the best things that happened to Allen through all the troubles at Miami was meeting his wife, Cynthia. She was a white student whose family were longtime owners of Ray Bussler's Restaurant in Oak Creek. Ray himself had played professional football in the 1940s for the old Chicago Cardinals. Will and Cynthia got married in their sophomore year.

"A lot of people ask how we could get married in the South back in those days," Allen says. "Miami was a little different. It wasn't like North Florida, where they might have burned our house down.

"As far as her family being accepting, eventually, yes. When they first found out we were getting married, they tried to talk her out of it. They thought there were going to be difficulties for her."

But Cynthia's parents also had raised her not to think negatively about people of color, he says. Will says he tried to teach his children the same racial attitudes he learned from his parents.

"I grew up in a very diverse area," he says. "It was never brought up in our household that we were any different from anybody else." Allen also passed on his father's insistence that children learn to farm.

"I did not really enjoy doing that work," says Erika, who got a bachelor's degree at the Art Institute of Chicago and a master's degree in art therapy from the University of Illinois. "I wanted to read and make art. But we didn't have any other farm labor, so it was just me and my brother and sister and mom and dad."

Erika's brother, Jason, remembers coming home from grade school to help his dad fulfill a contract to deliver half-a-hundred 50-pound bags of cabbage every week to a customer.

"In the fall, it was cold and wet, and we'd have to go out and cut cabbage, wash it, bag it. And my dad was just relentless," Jason says. "At the time, you're mad, but now we joke about it at family holidays. He was just trying to instill that work ethic. It made me the person I am today."

Today, Jason is a top attorney, a partner at Foley & Lardner specializing in mergers and acquisitions.

"My dad would always impress upon me that someday I would thank him," Erika says. "He said other

people wouldn't have any idea where food came from or how to do this kind of work and it would be really valuable. I definitely have seen that play itself out."

In fact, Erika is the only child who followed her father into the family business. Managing Growing Power's Chicago office, she adds "artistic twists," as she puts it, to urban farm projects by incorporating public art and other design elements. Growing Power has been creating projects in Chicago parks and neighborhoods since 2002.

"Urban farm projects also can be really beautiful aesthetically and impact people spiritually," Erika says. "Vegetable gardens not only feed communities, but also improve the look of urban neighborhoods."

Erika cites Growing Power's 20,000- square-foot urban garden in Grant Park on Chicago's lakefront. It includes more than 150 varieties of heirloom vegetables, herbs and edible flowers arranged with varying patterns of leaf shapes, colors and textures.

From the beginning, the concept at Growing Power always included teaching teenagers from some of the city's most impoverished neighborhoods how to grow their own food. The community garden near the former Cabrini-Green public housing project in Chicago is one example.

"A lot of our youth have gang affiliations and come from really hard backgrounds," says Erika. "We're really building their ability to function in the world and to be self-sufficient."

"I always ask kids to tell me how they feel when they have a really good meal," Will Allen recounts. "They always say, 'Well, when we go over to Grandma's house at Thanksgiving or Christmas, we feel really happy afterward.' And then I say, 'How do you feel when you have a bad meal?' And they always say, 'Oh, you mean like at school?'"

"Kids are telling us how powerful food is. So why do we try to feed kids on 75 cents a day in schools? I've seen how food transforms the lives of the kids we work with."

With his still-imposing size and physique, emphasized by the Growing Power sweatshirts he wears with cut-off sleeves, Allen can intimidate even the toughest teenagers.



## How is this man changing the way the world grows food? CONTINUED

“My employees say I’m scaring the kids. I guess it gets their attention,” he says. “But what really works with kids is being honest. I say, ‘There’s no radios. No cell phones. This isn’t a place to play. It’s a place to learn.’ Tell them up-front what the rules are and they know it’s part of the deal.”

For all of Allen’s hobnobbing with presidents, academics and high-powered executives, his most important connections remain those with ordinary folks like Sharon and Larry Adams. The Adamses are rebuilding the Lindsay Heights neighborhood on Milwaukee’s North Side through their Walnut Way Conservation Corp. The once-crime-ridden area is now getting funding from the 10-year, \$50 million project by real estate developer and philanthropist Joseph Zilber to improve poor neighborhoods in Milwaukee.

Larry remembers the first time they took Allen around the block in 2001 to share their vision for the neighborhood. “This was when it was still open violence, gunplay and prostitution,” Larry says. “Will walked the block with us and said, ‘I don’t know, man. This is kind of crazy.’ ”

They started out planting tulips to add beauty. Then Allen brought in his worms and compost-rich soil for backyard gardens. He trained neighbors how to raise their own healthy food. Whatever produce they didn’t consume, they could sell at Growing Power. A neighborhood once considered a deficit is now producing a bounty.

But for Allen to continue forging such relationships, he needs money. He estimates revenue from his lectures, educational sessions (ranging from a one-day workshop to a five-month training course), hands-on assistance building greenhouses and aquaponic systems, sale of soil and compost, and wholesale and retail sales of fish and produce accounts for more than half of Growing Power’s annual budget.

“To survive as a nonprofit these days,” he says, “we have to grow some of our own money, instead of just writing for grants.”

Interesting new revenue sources could include a book Allen is taking time off to work on with a New York writer and a possible reality TV series about food production focusing on Growing Power. An agent is shopping the project to cable TV venues.

Suddenly, the cause for which Allen has long been



a national advocate – growing food locally – is hot. Ironically, at the very point rural farmland is rapidly disappearing, “Buy Local” is becoming a popular catchphrase.

“At one time in our history, that’s how we fed ourselves,” he says. “Then we started carting food 1,500 miles across the country with energy we don’t have anymore.”

But Will Allen has the remedy. It’s simple, really. All you need is some worms. **GP**



## Planting the Seed

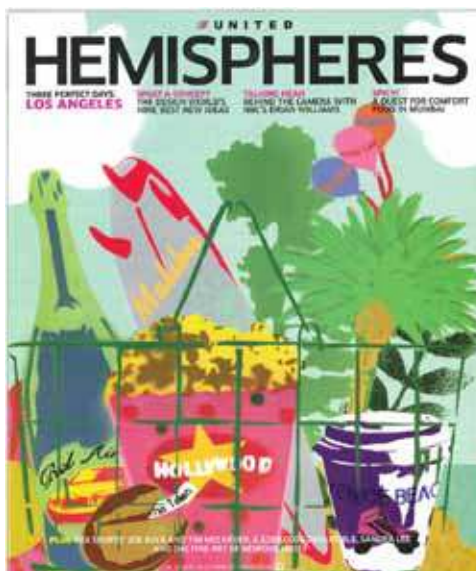
Leah Dobkin | United Hemispheres | OCT 2010

**WHO** • WILL ALLEN, 61

**MISSION** • To promote urban gardening, particularly in low-income neighborhoods where people might not otherwise have access to fresh and healthy food. "I want to be part of the revolution that changes how we grow, distribute and eat food so that the process is healthier for people and the planet," Allen says. He started Growing Power—a greenhouse complex that cultivates organic food and teaches people how to produce their own—in Milwaukee in 1993. He also operates farms in Chicago and rural Merton, Wisconsin, and has teamed with Michelle Obama's program to fight childhood obesity.

**MOTIVATION** • "Food doesn't just sustain our bodies—it can heal them," Allen says, adding that wealth shouldn't dictate access to healthy food. By teaching people how to grow organically and close to home, he is also helping to cut down on fuel emissions from transportation, thereby reducing pollution. "Much of our soil is contaminated," he says. "One of our challenges is not just to grow healthier food, but to grow healthier soil."

**HOOP DREAMS** • Prior to his career as an urban farmer, Allen played in the American Basketball Association and professionally in Belgium between 1971 and 1978. When he retired from the sport at age 28, he did a 15-year stint in marketing at The Marcus Corporation and Procter & Gamble before going back to the land. "I was raised on a six-acre farm," he says. "I went back to my roots to start a farm in Milwaukee to keep my hands in the dirt." - GP





# P is for PROSPER

DEBBIE MOORS | Urban Farm Magazine | SPRING 2010

## Urban-farm pioneer Will Allen's "Seven P's to Success" can help your dreams grow.

Compost, water and light nurture the sprouts, greens and vegetables at Will Allen's urban farm, Growing Power. But it's his "Seven P's" philosophy that builds roots and provides support so the farm and organization not only grow – they thrive.

Allen pioneered Growing Power with a small acreage in northern Milwaukee 17 years ago, determined to "create a more just food system." It's now one of the most successful and studied urban farms in the country, using sustainable methods to grow food that nourishes locally – and inspires globally.

On the day I talked to him, Allen was running from meeting to meeting and getting ready to lead a farm tour for a group of executives. It was his typical 17-hour, multitasking day.

But then, this is a man whose greenhouses are multitasking marvels. They are classrooms, labs, community centers, idea incubators, and microcosms with five layers of life that inspire school children and corporate executives.

At and below ground level in each greenhouse, 10,000 Great Lake perch or tilapia flash along in aquaculture runs. Sprouts and greens (growing in a mix of worm castings and coir fiber) are stacked and hung, fed and watered by the waste from the fish runs. Even Growing Power's compost has more than one job: It's soil and fertilizer, and it provides heat for the greenhouses in winter. These greenhouses are at the heart of a multi-location system that produces enough food for more than 10,000 people annually.

So, how does he do it? With a handful of P's.

Drawing on his background as the son of a farmer and as a marketer and professional athlete (he played in the American Basketball Association), Allen created a list of principles that he says are integral to success – whether you're building a sustainable community garden or working in your own backyard. It all starts with Pride.

## PRIDE

"Pride will make you do something, and do it well," says Will Allen.

When Growing Power started, Allen had a group of kids who wanted to learn about growing food. At the same time, he saw what he called "food deserts" – where access to food in inner cities was limited to fast food or highly processed foods in convenience stores. Grocery stores were too far away.



Pride fueled Allen's resolve. He took what he knew about farming and focused on doing it better. He used new techniques, experimented and pushed forward with velocity.

His methods began to produce results – not only in the greenhouse, but also with kids and community members who came to learn. For them, pride became both a motivator and result – and then a motivator again.

"You need to take kids through the whole process: making compost, planting seeds, maintaining the plants, harvesting the food, then having a meal. When they get to taste that vegetable or get it ready to market and make money from what they've grown, they become proud. And that makes the second round of planting and growing even more successful.

## PUTTING IT TO WORK

Prove yourself. For your sustainability goals, think about taking the next step in a new direction. If you're working to build an urban community farm, it means finding people in the community who also carry that sense of pride and desire to work hard and prove themselves.

## PATIENCE

Kids get it pretty quickly. "Farming is not instant gratification," Allen says. "Food waste can take from eight months to a year before it's finished compost. It takes 50 days to grow a head of cabbage. The kids are impatient, so one of the training pieces they learn quickly is that when they put the seed in the ground, it might take days for it to come up."



## p is for prosper CONTINUED

Patience is something Allen has a lot of. “I can wait a long time,” he says. “But being patient doesn’t mean being inactive.”

When Allen first purchased the property that is now Growing Power’s headquarters, it was an old nursery that had been divided. He purchased most of the acreage along with six 1920-era greenhouses and one house. Two more houses were sold separately and sat enticingly out of reach. Allen knew he could really use the houses and the remainder of the property to expand Growing Power in new directions.

“I waited a lot of years to purchase those houses. It took me 17 years to get the third house. But while I was being patient, I was also doing other things. Patience is about moving forward while you wait.”

### PUTTING IT TO WORK

“Have the patience to not try to do everything your first year,” advises Allen. “Do what you can afford while you’re patiently growing your passion. Do it right with good soil. Gain practical experience by going to a hands-on weekend training. Know that it’s going to take time.”

And, he says, use what you have while you’re waiting. “Let’s say you’re operating with three different compost sites, but a big primo sight may be your vision down the road. That site may take years to find and acquire. You can’t put up roadblocks and say, ‘Yeah, but I’m looking for this ideal spot.’ You don’t wait. You compost on three different sites because that’s what you have right now.”

### PASSION

A group of school kids arrive at Growing Power for a tour. As Allen shows them around, he stops to explain vermiculture and reaches into a brown mass of what looks like a rich soil. Or is it? Hands that can palm a basketball now cradle a wriggling mass of 2,000 worms, much to the kids’ delight.

“It’s a transformative moment,” he says. “At first, they jump back. Then after a while they want to hold them. It’s a quick way to get the kids really engaged.”

And it’s a snapshot of the passion Allen has for teaching kids and volunteers about sustainable methods. Kids know authentic passion when they see it, and it’s contagious. “As they move along the continuum, growing their own food, passion starts growing like the plant.”

But passion only comes after pride and patience, Allen asserts. “Real passion is like love, not infatuation. It takes time to really become passionate about something. Take vermiculture. Lots of people might say, ‘These worms are cool,’ but the fact of the matter is, maybe one out of 10 people will actually start and maintain a vermiculture program.”

Pride and patience will help you move beyond liking the idea of urban farming. “Then passion will sustain you,” Allen says.

### PUTTING IT TO WORK

“If it’s something you really love, nothing will stop you from achieving your goal,” he says. Sharing your passion with others can strengthen your farm at any level.

And, if you’re trying to start a community program, identify others with a similar passion – start, for example, by asking the city council for names. “You need to find the heart of the community,” Allen says. “There may only be five people, but those are the people you have to engage. They’ve stayed in that crime-ridden food-desert area because they have the passion to make their community better.”



### PERFORMANCE

“Performance puts your passion to work and makes something positive happen,” Allen says. Growing Power works closely with community partners who contribute to their composting waste stream.

“We pick up food waste from 20 different sites,” Allen says, reading through the tightly scheduled list of stops for the day. Coffee shops, breweries, bakeries, corporate cafeterias, restaurants – even the Milwaukee Zoo – all prepare waste for Growing Power to haul away and compost.

“We have to be there when we say we’re going to be there,” says Allen.

Reliability is key to performance, and because those partners are providing waste, Allen’s composting program performs dramatically. In 2009, Growing Power composted 10 million pounds of waste. In 2010, with a new, consolidated composting site, Allen is shooting for 24 million pounds.

### PUTTING IT TO WORK

“Constantly reach for new methods so that if one method or system doesn’t bring income or fulfill your

## p is for prosper CONTINUED

mission, there are 10 other possibilities that do,” Allen says. Set goals. Look at what you’re doing and ask where that project could be next year. If you want to go beyond your own kitchen waste for composting, talk to your neighbors. “Give them a 5-gallon bucket to collect food waste,” says Allen. Collect it from them regularly, and gather their leaves for them, he adds, then build a composting system that will perform.

If you’re developing a community project, “you have to prove you can perform with a very concrete example,” Allen asserts. “You have to do it first, then you have to show it to people in a non-intrusive way and say, “This is what we can do.”

### PERSEVERANCE

Wisconsin isn’t exactly worm paradise in the winter. Worms like a cozy 70-degree-F climate, and Milwaukee in January isn’t pushing the mercury anywhere close to that.

When Allen began to explore vermicomposting, he heard over and over that he couldn’t have an outdoor system without losing a lot of worms. Perseverance led him to a system that worked.

“I learn in a very hands-on kind of way,” says Allen. “I had to do my own research. It took me five years. Now, someone can give me a handful of worms and drop me off anywhere in the world, and I can build a system.”

### PUTTING IT TO WORK

Don’t give up. Learn everything you can about what you’re doing, and if something doesn’t work, don’t be afraid to try again and experiment. Continue to pursue – and share – your ideas, inspiring others to spread the word “That’s why tours are so important,” says Allen.

“Seventy people come see our program, and then go out, and they tell 70 more people. That’s how you grow a movement into a revolution.”

### PARTNERS

“You can’t do this work in isolation,” says Allen. “You may not necessarily like everyone, but they’re partners in a community, and if you kick them off the team, you may lose a partner who will make the project really sing.”

With several thousand employees, Rockwell Automation in Milwaukee is the size of a small town. Allen showed Rockwell how they could save money by letting Growing Power pick up their cafeteria’s cooked food waste for compost. At the same time, he offers a farmers’ market on site for employees. Rockwell gains positive publicity for a green initiative, less waste ends up in a landfill, and Allen gains fodder for compost, along with partnered publicity.

Equally important, Allen engages neighbors who live near Growing Power so they benefit. “If we start moving compost and neighbors catch a whiff, they don’t call the city, they call us. When you’re embedded in the community, you’re looked at as an asset, and the community will protect that asset,” he says.

### PUTTING IT TO WORK

Engaging neighbors and community members is key. “Let’s say you want to grow a garden on a vacant lot,” Allen says, “but the neighbor doesn’t really want a big garden or compost next door. You have to engage that neighbor and those across the street. You say, ‘I’m going to grow a garden. I’d be willing to share some of that food with your family.’ You might even hire some



of the local kids to come help. Pretty soon, everyone is pulling for you because they want to eat some of those tomatoes.”

### PLAY

Sharing ripe garden tomatoes can make a partner out of just about anyone. And it’s the sharing – and celebrating – that Allen points to as the final “P.”

“Celebrate your successes. Let people have fun, enjoy the harvest and build pride so that they’re ready to start all over again,” he says.

At Growing Power, kids, volunteers and community members experience that when they get to grow and eat – or sell – the produce they’ve put so much work into. Workshops offer celebration, too. “It’s like practicing for a sporting event, and the game showcases the team’s hard work. Our workshops give our staff a chance to meet some of the people asking for our services and showcase what they can do. They’re fun, and they give them time to take a deep

## p is for prosper CONTINUED

breath, look at some of the positive things they've done, and re-energize before they start over," says Allen.

### PUTTING IT TO WORK

Plan a block party or a community celebration to allow everyone to enjoy the results of your hard work. Then use it as an opportunity to foster pride and passion for the next steps along the way.



### GOOD FOOD, EQUAL ACCESS

**"Ok, here's a question for you," Allen says to me.**

**"Do you think kids know what good food is?"**

I hemmed and hawed, thinking about my own young daughters, and how I seem to always be trying to remind them to eat healthy food. Waffling, I ventured a guess. "No, they need to be taught?"

"No they don't. All kids know what good food is," Allen says. And he explained that if you ask a child what good food is, they'd point to dinner at their grandmother's, or a holiday meal. And bad food? "School lunches," they answer.

But in an area where processed and fast food is the norm and fresh produce or free-range eggs are rare, it's not a matter of choice, it's a matter of access.

"Grocery stores don't locate in high-crime, low-income areas. But research has shown that there is economic viability in low income areas – so that's not a valid argument," Allen asserts.

Food justice and dismantling food racism is at the heart of much of what Growing Power does, by making good, healthy food accessible where it isn't generally found. At the Milwaukee Growing Power store, people can buy free-range eggs, fresh produce, honey and fish.

Growing Power also works with schools, the Boys and Girls Clubs, and universities. In Merton, Wis., the organization operates a rural, 40-acre farm with 5 acres devoted to growing produce and the remainder growing hay and feed for farm livestock. Allen's daughter, Erika, has taken the Growing Power mission and methods to Chicago, where programs include a Grant Park farm that brings fresh food to the heart of the city and offers jobs and educational opportunities.

Allen's vision is also reaching communities in Arkansas, Massachusetts, and Mississippi, and his work in urban farming and food justice hasn't gone unnoticed. In 2008, he received the prestigious



MacArthur Foundation "Genius" Award, and in September 2009, Allen was invited to the Clinton Global Initiative to present his proposal for a Growing Power-based program Zimbabwe and South Africa. With CGI's help, Growing Power is working to raise \$2 million to launch the Africa program.

Geographically, Allen's work stretches miles from where he first grew to love farming; philosophically, it's the same neighborhood. "I think if my parents could see me now, they'd say I was doing pretty much what I was supposed to be doing," says Allen. His father was a sharecropper in South Carolina before the family moved to a 6-acre farm in Rockville, Md.

"We didn't have much money, and we didn't have a car or TV, but my parents grew food and my mother was an incredible cook," Allen says. "People just came to our house around dinnertime, and my mother would cook for 30 people. We liked to share what we grew." **GP**





# Will Allen returns to the White House

Milwaukee Courier | May 29 2010

## Growing Power CEO guest at Mexican state dinner

Just two months after First Lady Michelle Obama asked him to stand with her in Washington as one of four Americans speaking in support of the launch of her "Let's Move!" initiative to end childhood obesity, Will Allen of Growing Power was again invited to the White House, this time as a guest at a dinner to honor the official state visit of the president of Mexico.

The State Dinner was held on Wednesday, May 19, 2010 at the White House in a tent on the South Lawn. The invitation read: "The President and Mrs. Obama request the pleasure of the company of Mr. Will Allen at a dinner in honor of His Excellency Felipe Calderón, President of Mexico, and Mrs. Margarita Zavala."

"It is an absolute honor to be invited by the President and Mrs. Obama to such a prestigious and important event," Allen said. "It gave me an opportunity to continue building important relationships that will help drive our Good Food Revolution. "

Allen, who lives in Oak Creek attended the dinner with his wife, Cynthia. The black-tie affair marked the Obama administration's second state dinner-and unlike the first one, this one went off without any complications.

Allen was among a handful of special guests personally invited by First Lady Michelle Obama.

"I really admire her work in terms of our youth," he said. "The garden at the White House has really engaged a lot of folks, inspired a lot of folks to grow a garden. That makes me happy because that's what we're trying to do."

Another special treat for Allen was the opportunity to enjoy the upscale Mexican cuisine of Rick Bayless,



President Barack Obama greets guest Will Allen in a receiving line in the Blue Room of the White House, May 19, 2010. (Official White House Photo by Samantha Appleton)

renowned chef who has been featured on the series Top Chef Masters, and owner of Chicago restaurant Topolobampo, one of the Obamas favorite eating spots in their hometown.

"He's pretty legendary. He uses organic ingredients, sourced locally and has his own garden where he grows a lot of the food he uses in the restaurant." Allen said.

Other invited guests at the dinner included retired golfer Lorena Ochoa, actresses Salma Hayek and Eva Longoria- Parker.

Entertainment included Beyonce' and noted Mexican entertainment team, Rodrigo Sanchez and Gabriela Quintero originally from Mexico City.

The invitation capped a heady week for Allen. On May 15, in the midst of hosting Growing Power's Fifth Annual National and International Urban Agriculture Workshop, with more than 100 attendees participating in intensive training, he took time off from his duties to accept an honorary doctor of fine arts degree from the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design and to deliver the commencement address to 140 graduates of the institute. **GP**



# growing hope, growing change, **GROWING POWER**

SHANNON SLOAN SPICE | Outpost Exchange | JULY 2009 ISSUE

## Will Allen just might be the Johnny Appleseed of the next food revolution.

Change is on the wind. Literally. America has just ushered in a new president dedicated to empowering the country through grassroots efforts and winning his campaign with the tag words, "Hope and Change." Renewable energy is at the forefront of the nation's mind as we battle a devastated economy and begin to rebuild global relationships. The biggest hope for the new climate in the way Americans will do things, both as consumers and entrepreneurs, is to be found in the green sector. Milwaukee, believe it or not, is not just leading the nation in change but also is quickly becoming a global green capital.

Our future leaders will not be folks in suits, but farmers. They are not mainstream, but minorities. The movers and the shakers are shakin' it from the ghettos and from Indian Country. They come from third world countries, the sovereign nations within this nation. Some speak English as a second language, are Hmong or Latino. Others live well under the radar as Mennonites and Amish.

Much of Milwaukee's claim to green glory is because of the efforts of urban farmer, Will Allen, founder and CEO of Growing Power. Allen has spent the last 16 years developing his business as an organic farmer, dedicated to growing and providing healthy food to low income areas. He passionately teaches and encourages sustainability to communities all around the world, and in so doing is fighting economic racism.

Watching Allen move around his urban farm at 5500 W. Silver Spring Drive, you can see how he is able to accomplish this mighty feat: everyone is important to him; every visitor, staff member, or small child. All are addressed and included. Though he is on a hectic schedule of national and international travel, he pauses and takes the time to engage everyone in a meaningful way. His philosophy is simple, yet profound and contagious: people matter most.

At [www.growingpower.org](http://www.growingpower.org), the vision statement reads: "inspiring communities to build sustainable



Will Allen just might be the Johnny Appleseed of the next food revolution



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growing hope, growing change, growing power CONTINUED

food systems that are equitable and ecologically sound, creating a just world, one food-secure community at a time.” In the past six or seven years, Allen estimates they have touched at least 1000 organizations, both local and abroad. Allen has consulted on an international platform; in Kenya with the NGOs, for Heifer Project International and for The Institute of Sustainable Communities in Ukraine. Allen is in Europe again this summer, where he frequently consults with the State Department. This time, he will address the Hague World Urban Agriculture Symposium, and lend his muscle to the movement for farming in London’s Hyde Park. In Rotterdam, Allen will look at new greenhouse technology with underground heating systems which draw hot air into storage during the summer and release it during the winter.

Last September, Allen received a \$500,000 “genius grant” award from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. In May of this year, he received a \$400,000 grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to create sustainable farming jobs in the Detroit area for destitute urban communities hit the worst by the recession. Allen explains that factory farming and the big machinery/technology mentality destroyed more than a million farming jobs in just a few short decades.

He says: “The new agriculture creates thousands of jobs with a standard that is above excellent. We call our food “beyond organic” because it is way better than the USDA standards. Many of the farmers in my organization aren’t even USDA certified because they believe the system is too watered-down. This is a huge movement, grown from the ground up. It is multi-cultural and multi-generational. We are launching an

attack on the current food system and restructuring it. By growing food in our own communities we reduce our carbon footprint. But a big part of what we do is educating people to think differently.”

One of the biggest challenges Growing Power faces is converting contaminated soil in available urban land plots into healthy soil. Allen explained they solicit compost donations from the community and combine them with worm boxes, or vermicomposting practices to produce rich and fertile soil. Operations have expanded into Chicago with Allen’s daughter Erika at the helm. Growing Power has a garden in Caprini Green and urban farms in Grant and Jackson Park. A 40- acre Boys and Girls farm/camp in Merton helps train their Youth Corps.

Growing Power also started Rainbow Farmers Cooperative which includes 300 small family farmers from Wisconsin, Michigan, Iowa, Illinois, Mississippi, Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina and Florida. The RFC members receive cash on delivery for their products so they can immediately reinvest in their businesses, enjoy marketing through the Growing Power web site, have access to restaurants and wholesalers and are provided with cooler storage space. And of course, Growing Power is there for these farmers in many educational capacities, leading workshops and training seminars, assisting with grant-writing, project-planning, transportation and composting.

Not stopping there, Growing Power also hosts the Growing Food and Justice for All Initiative which works to dismantle racism by bringing change agents together to affect social changes through these practices. Their mission states: The GFJAI is a new initiative aimed at dismantling racism and empowering low-income and communities of color through sustainable and local agriculture. This comprehensive network views dismantling racism as a core principal which brings together social change agents from diverse sectors working to bring about new, healthy and sustainable food systems and supporting and building multicultural leadership in impoverished communities throughout the world.

The group’s 2nd annual conference is this October at State Fair Park. *Go to [www.growingfoodandjustice.org](http://www.growingfoodandjustice.org) for info.*

These implications are exciting when one thinks about what Allen calls the ground-up changes which are coming in urban areas. First Nations people are also



## growing hope, growing change, growing power CONTINUED

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very driven to be a crucial part of the growing green industry from reservations.

In 2008, Executive Director of Honor the Earth, Winona LaDuke, authored a ‘food sovereignty’ handbook called *Launching a Green Economy for Brown People*. She makes a good case for developing wind and solar power on Native lands, which happen to be predominantly located in the country’s windiest states. LaDuke says national studies estimate that reservations could produce one-fourth to one third of the presently installed electric demand. This means about 400,000 domestic manufacturing jobs in wind power alone. In 2006, the American Solar Energy Society projected that renewable energy and energy efficiency projects saw about \$970 billion in revenues and 8.5 million jobs, and these numbers will only grow. This would create a job market which could bring the security and self-sufficiency these sovereign nations have been hoping for, for so long.

Sustainability isn’t the only reason to return to traditional farming. These practices will also reverse the epidemic of rampant diabetes that plagues Indian populations. Recent studies have linked reservation diets of processed foods to this disease and the highest mortality rates in the nation.

La Duke writes: “In the upcoming years, we hope to facilitate the creation of Green Jobs for Brown People Initiative...that will prepare our communities to participate in a central way in the next economy. This strategy will include job training, funding for efficiency and retrofitting and support for renewable energy and local agriculture. It will involve reservation, urban Indigenous communities and communities of color working in partnership with businesses, unions, institutions and the general public.” Visit [www.honorearth.org](http://www.honorearth.org) for more information.

### Government gets on board

Milwaukee city government is also trying to take action in much the same way. In 2008, the US Department of Energy designated Milwaukee as one of the 25 cities in the country to become a solar city. Under the City Office of Environmental Sustainability, Milwaukee Shines has launched an education campaign to bring about awareness and to train electricians to install solar power. Project Manager Andrea Luecke says we are already in the process of converting to renewable energy. Steps are being made to retrofit many of our

old, inefficient buildings with new windows, equipment, boilers, and even light bulbs. Currently, a project to outfit the downtown Milwaukee County Library with a green roof and solar power is underway. Luecke says Milwaukee Shines is committed to training installers as well as providing hands-on experience. In so doing, they are hoping to create a market and demand for solar energy.

Green Alderman, Tony Zielinski, of district 14, is spearheading the future growth of the city. Zielinski is working to get an ordinance through where all new construction would be required to feature solar water systems. He says it is crucial for us to become independent of fossil fuels and this dependency is what has caused this economic recession. He is trying to create in Bay View a “New Urbanism” where everyone is within walking distance to retail and recreation, where one can live in a community and not need a car. He hopes the light rail train system will be installed in the city in the next few years.

Most excitingly, plans are in process to build a green residential community on the corner of Lincoln and Bay streets, an abandoned US army base. The project is called Eco-Bay and Zielinski is confident it can break ground next year.

The development is to be energy sustainable, only using energy it creates itself. It will be the first community of its kind in the state. Zielinski believes once people get word of its fiscal feasibility, Eco-Bay can act as a great marketing strategy for future green building. The alderman gets excited when he speaks about this.

“People can convert their homes old or new to solar power and more than pay for themselves,” he says. “They can get paid to do it. The faster we promote renewable energy the better the economy will grow.”

We Energies offers workshops in how consumers can convert their homes. And [beagreenirene.com](http://beagreenirene.com) can send a consultant to your home for \$99 to help you make greener choices. Milwaukee is part of the green revolution. Be proud and proactive about who you are.

**GP**



# AWARDS and RECOGNITION

## 2011

- Green Giant Green Award of \$25,000, designated for Will Allen College Scholarship Fund for Growing Power Youth Corps
- Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters, Marquette University
- 2011 finalist for the Harris Bank Cornerstone Award, honored by LISC Milwaukee at the 12th Annual Milwaukee Awards for Neighborhood Development Innovation
- Growing Power received the Hall of Fame Award, Kiwanis Club of Milwaukee
- Mr. Allen, alongside Prince Charles and others, participated in the Future of Food conference at Georgetown University
- May 11th designated Growing Power Day in Milwaukee by Mayor Tom Barrett
- Trailblazer Service Award, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. Epsilon Kappa Omega Chapter
- Will Allen, Community Leader Award, Jewel Osco
- Growing Power, Engaged Community Partner Service-Learning Recognition Certificate, Marian University

## 2010

- Will Allen named one of the World's 100 Most Influential People by *Time Magazine*
- Will Allen spoke to the nation from the White House as part of First Lady Michelle Obama's announcement of her "Let's Move!" initiative
- Invited to the White House State Dinner in honor of Mexican President Felipe Calderon
- National Jason Award, Children's Square
- William Dempster Hoard Award for distinction in agriculture, Wisconsin Historical Society
- In Harmony with Hope Award, The Elfenworks Foundation
- Awarded an honorary doctorate of fine arts, Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design.
- Headliner Award, Milwaukee Press Club
- Key to the City presented by Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett

## 2009

- Growing Green Award, National Resources Defense Council
- Frank Kirpatrick Award, Greater Milwaukee Foundation
- Heritage Award, 29th Annual State of Wisconsin Tribute & Ceremony honoring Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
- Will Allen - Honoree, The *Milwaukee Times* 24th Annual Black Excellence Awards
- Mayor Tom Barrett thanks Growing Power for participation in the Summer Earn and Learn Program
- November 9, 2009, proclaimed "Will Allen Appreciation Day" by Alfonzo King, Mayor of Goldsboro, NC

## 2008

- John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation fellow
- Pentagon medal to Will Allen and Growing Power
- Harry Chapin Self-Reliance Award Honoree
- The Environmental Lifetime Achievement Award, Keep Greater Milwaukee Beautiful
- September 24, 2008, proclaimed "Will Allen Day" by Tom Barrett, Mayor of the City of Milwaukee

## 2007

- \$15,000 grant to Growing Power Inc. for Farm to City Market Basket Program, Miller Brewing Company Employee Fund
- Recognition for service as a member of the Board of Visitors 2004-2007, College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, University of Wisconsin-Madison
- Growing Power, Inc., Trail Blazer Award Finalist, 8th Annual Milwaukee Awards for Neighborhood Development Innovation

## 2005

- Leadership for a Changing World Awardee
- Urban Farmer of the Year, Chicago

# AWARDS and RECOGNITION

CONTINUED

## 2004

- Honored for participation in Heifer International's 60th Anniversary
- Official recognition of Growing Power and Will Allen by the Common Council of the City of Milwaukee

## 2003

- Will Allen acknowledged to be "Our Future, Our Hope: Planter of the Positive Seed" by Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors
- Growing Power recognized by Common Council of the City of Milwaukee for hosting Rooted in Milwaukee's "Growing Up Green Through the Power of Food" Conference
- Community Partners of Milwaukee Appreciation Award
- Recognition of outstanding service to Milwaukee County from the African-American Supervisors as part of the Ninth Annual Milwaukee County Black History Celebration.

## 2002

- Leadership Award, Community Food Security Coalition

## 2000

- Commendation for leadership and diligent work in sustainable agriculture, Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection
- Recognition for participation in National Public Lands Day Lynden Hil Urban Tree House site, America's Outdoors Center for Conservation, Recreation and Resources
- Recognition of the opening of Growing Power, Common Council of the City of Milwaukee
- Recognition of Will Allen for the work he has done in the community, Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors

## 1998

- "Student participants of Youth Building Communities expresses appreciation to William Allen for community service support this 29th day of May 1998 at Andrew S. Douglas Community Academy."

## ADDITIONAL AWARDS

- Community Partners Appreciation Award, "For your contribution of service in helping to make our community and environment a better and beautiful place."

## RECENT ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Conducted monthly "From the Ground Up" workshops from January - June, hundreds of people have received training in Living Biological Worm Systems & Compost; Aquaculture; Beekeeping; Community Project Design; Year-round Greenhouse Production; Hoop-house production; Mycoscaping; Renewable Energy; Hoop-House Construction; and Dismantling Racism in the Food System.
- 39 people completed Growing Power's Commercial Urban Agriculture Training Course in preparation of launching or reorganizing commercial urban and sustainable agricultural social ventures.
- Growing Power hosted eight Food Security Fellows from Uganda and Kenya for six weeks





# Speaking Engagements

## 2011

- Vancouver Trip, SFU Centre for Dialogue (Vancouver, BC)
- Henry Ford-Carver's Legacies Conference (Dearborn, MI)
- Brookfield East High School (Brookfield, WI)
- Florida A&M University (Tallahassee, FL)
- Green Summit (Milwaukee, WI)
- Miami University Hamilton (Hamilton, OH)
- Annie E Casey Foundation (Baltimore, MD)
- The Tuckahoe Woman's Club (Richmond, VA)
- Lawrence University (Appleton, WI)
- Wisconsin Medical Society (Madison, WI)
- UWFox Valley (Menasha, WI)
- Food for Good Farm, Paul Quinn College (Dallas, TX)
- University of the District of Columbia (Washington, DC)
- University of Minnesota (St. Paul, MN)
- Sustainable Agriculture Project, University of Minnesota (Duluth, MN)
- Students for the Oneness of Humankind, University of Wisconsin-Madison (Madison, WI)
- MacArthur Fellows Gathering (Racine, WI)
- Congress for New Urbanism (Madison, WI)
- Greater Newark Conservancy (Montclair, NJ)
- MREA Energy Fair (Stevens Point, WI)
- Rotary Club of Milwaukee (Milwaukee, WI)
- Ohio State University, Trumbull County Extension (Cortland, OH)
- Children's Hospital (Milwaukee, WI)
- Colorado Health Symposium (Keystone, CO)
- Organic Valley Farm (La Farge, WI)
- Green Acres, Lincoln University Coop Extension (Kansas City, MO)
- Urban Seeds (Evansville, IN)
- Northwest Earth Institute (Port Townsend, WA)

## 2010

First Lady's "Let's Move!" initiative; One of four Americans selected to speak from the White House to reverse the epidemic of childhood obesity. (Washington DC)

- Clinton Global Initiative University (Miami, FL)
- Urban Farming for Food Justice Creatives 4 Community (Seattle, WA)
- Ecological Education Summit (Washington, DC)
- Community Food Security Coalition (New Orleans, LA)
- Sowing Seeds Here and Now!: A Chesapeake Area Urban Farming Summit - Keynote Speaker (Washington DC - via video conferencing)
- Black Farmers Conference (New York, NY)
- Florida Small Farm Conference - Keynote Speaker, (Kissimmee, FL), via video conferencing
- Soil Summit Breaking New Grounds (Louisville, KY), via video conferencing
- Compost Matters Conference - Keynote Speaker (Philadelphia, PA)
- Festival of Faiths (Louisville, KY)
- Spirit and Place (Indianapolis, IN)
- University of California Berkeley (Berkeley, CA)
- Xavier University, (Cincinnati, OH)
- Food in Bloom, Indiana University - Keynote Speaker (Bloomington, IN)
- Chicago Lights Fundraiser (Chicago, IL)
- Visual Art Lecture Series, Princeton University (Princeton, NJ)
- Edible Estates Book Launch (New York, NY)
- Celebration Midwest Value Added Agriculture Conference - Keynote Speaker (Eau Claire, WI)
- Local Foods and Sustainable Agriculture Conference (La Crosse, WI)
- The Human Face of the Economy (Waukesha, WI)
- Marian University (Fond du Lac, WI)
- First Unitarian Society (Madison, WI)
- Growing Power National-International Small Farm Conference (Milwaukee, WI)
- Greater MKE Foundation, Herbert J. Mueller Society (Milwaukee, WI)
- Wells Fargo Corporate Headquarters (Milwaukee, WI)
- Marquette University High School Multi Cultural Week (Milwaukee, WI)

## Speaking Engagements

### Continued

#### 2009

Clinton Global Initiative Annual Meeting (Austin, TX)  
 2009 Amsterdam Conference on the Human Dimensions of  
 Global Environmental Change (Amsterdam, Netherlands)  
 Kellogg Conference (San Jose, CA)  
 American Corn Growers Conference (Coralville, IA)  
 American Horticultural Society (Cleveland, OH)  
 TFN Annual Conference (Miami, FL)  
 Georgia Organic Conference (Tbilisi, GA)  
 Southern SAWG Conference (Chattanooga, TN)  
 Northeast Organic Farming Association Conference  
 (Amherst, MA)  
 Center for Environment Farming (Goldsboro, NC)  
 Virginia Biological Farming Conference (Richmond, VA)  
 Small Farm Family Conference (Richmond, VA)  
 Green to Grey Festival (Youngstown, OH)  
 Green Town Conference (Chicago, IL)  
 America's Planners Association Conference (Mpls, MN)  
 Great Kids Farm (Baltimore, MD)  
 Stan Hywet Hall and Garden (Akron, OH)  
 Bioneers by the Bay (New Bradford, MA)  
 Pop Tech Conference (Candem, ME)  
 Connecticut Forum (Hartford, CT)  
 NSI Symposium (Davie, FL)  
 Friends of Ryerson Woods Symposium (Deerfield, IL)  
 Wisconsin Book Festival (Madison, WI)  
 WI Sustainable Council Conference (Milwaukee, WI)  
 Milwaukee Public Museum (Milwaukee, WI)  
 Universities: Yale University, UW Stevens Point, Columbia  
 College, Santa Monica College, Marquette University,  
 Milwaukee School of Engineering (MSOE)

## Media Appearances

### Radio and Television Interviews/Movies

#### 2011

- PRI, Tavis Smiley Show
- Making Contact National Radio, Zoe Sullivan - Food Justice: Black farmers in Wisconsin
- Harlem Community Radio, Leroy Baylor
- Growing Cities: A documentary from Dan Susman
- WPR, Larry Meiller Show
- Emerald Planet, Dr. Samuel Hancock

#### 2010

- TV One First Lady Let's Move Special
- Farm Aid 2010 concert with Tavis Smiley
- ABC, Diane Sawyer: "American's Heart"
- PBS, Growing a Greener World Episode 105
- NBC, Nightly News, The Today Show, MSNBC - "100 History Makers in the Making"
- CNN Ali Velshi - Mission Possible: Will Allen Farms in a 'Food Desert'
- Bloomberg TV, Innovator - Tabitha Soren reports on urban farm pioneer Will Allen

#### 2009

- CNN, The Solutions - "Urban Farms"
- Sundance Channel - "Big Ideas for the Small Planet"
- PBS, Retirement Revolution
- Fresh! the Movie



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