

Blossoming Hope: A Cultivating Journey Towards Food Justice in San Francisco's Bayview Hunters Point Neighborhood

By Abraham John Naser - June 25, 2023

In the bustling city of San Francisco, California, where towering skyscrapers and urban landscapes dominate the scene, a different kind of revolution has quietly taken root. In 2014, a remarkable transformation began in San Francisco's Bayview Hunters Point (BVHP) community. What was once a desolate brownfield filled with garbage and weeds is now a thriving farm that provides residents with fresh, healthy, and organic produce. The incredible journey of community empowerment, sustainable agriculture, and food justice was made possible through the efforts of community visionary Ted Fang and activist Faheem Carter.

The journey started with Fang's vision to create a community garden and bring Asian Americans together long before the farm became a reality. Numerous community meetings were held to gather input and determine how the farm would operate in the community's best interest. After extensive outreach and collaboration, Caltrain generously offered a one-acre piece of land located on top of a functioning train tunnel surrounded by single-family homes. The initial state of the land was overwhelming and provided many challenges. Undeterred by the barren landscape, Ted Fang, son of former San Francisco Examiner newspaper owner Florence Fang, shared the project plans with the community. The call was answered by many individuals, among them Faheem Carter, a 30-year-old African American man from the BVHP neighborhood. Carter has a profound passion for horticulture and serves as the head gardener and custodian at Lick-Wilmerding High School (LWHS) in San Francisco. He has a deep affection for sunflowers and enjoys immersing himself in the rhythms of funk music. Furthermore, he has received multiple honors in recognition of his accomplishments at the farm.



The plot of land offered by Caltrain and the current home of the Florence Fang Community Farm. Photo courtesy of Florence Fang Community Farm website.

At a young age, Carter started growing his own vegetables in the backyard of his family's home as a way to combat health issues prevalent in his family, such as high blood pressure and cancer. He recognized the healing properties of beets and sought to continuously generate his own seeds without relying on external sources. In a February 2023 interview with *San Francisco Magazine*, Carter said, "I was growing carrots, lettuce, lemons, strawberries, tomatoes right in my own backyard. I was so happy to see my family eat the things I was able to grow." In 2006, Carter graduated from San Francisco's Lick-Wilmerding High School Aim High Program. This no-cost multi-year summer enrichment program fosters a love of learning, which encouraged Carter to think of his future plans and ways in which he could support his community. In 2010, Carter enrolled in the horticulture program at City College of San Francisco, where he honed his skills in sustainable agriculture and urban farming.

While in college, Carter's pursuit of a more significant gardening space led him to contact the City of San Francisco repeatedly. He faced rejection after rejection. Carter's perseverance paid off when he was given Fang's phone number. It was through this connection that Fang and Carter crossed paths, and the encounter left Fang profoundly moved. After hearing Carter's story, Fang saw the potential in him and extended an invitation. Aware of the long road ahead, Fang promised Carter that if he stood by his side and joined the cleanup efforts, he would receive a plot of land to cultivate. Their shared determination led to something much greater - the fully-fledged Florence Fang Community Farm (FFCF).

The path to realizing this vision was not an easy one. The initial state of the plot was far from promising, requiring two years of dedicated efforts. Much of that time was spent clearing the land and spreading mulch to nurture the soil and prepare it for cultivation. About 30-40 BVHP resident volunteers, including many elderly Chinese immigrants who faced language barriers, rolled up their sleeves and worked tirelessly with Carter and Fang to transform the neglected and barren land. The community's support was vital, and despite the uncertainty of whether the project would be embraced, the initial members like Carter, who helped start the farm, stayed committed. This dedication allowed the farm to expand and welcome new participants, transforming the once-desolate space into a thriving hub of organic farming and community engagement. In a May 2022 interview with the *Peninsula Press*, Fang discussed his thoughts on retiring when the farm was established and said, "I went on sabbatical for four or five years and all my other projects got passed on. But this one was not really happening, so we just left it in the corner there...and then when I came back, they were growing a lot." During Fang's absence, Carter took charge and spearheaded remarkable improvements to the farm, surpassing Fang's initial vision. Through Carter's dedicated efforts, the farm experienced substantial growth in vegetable production, leading to a plentiful assortment of crops that thrived within the space.

In the BVHP neighborhood, where access to healthy, organic options is limited, the farm serves as a beacon of hope. While the neighborhood's only grocery store primarily stocks family-sized bags of chips and soda, and liquor stores and fast food establishments line the streets, the farm offers an alternative. The FFCF has formed partnerships with local food pantries, distributing the nutritious and organic produce grown on the farm to the community. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, around 150 to 200 people benefited from this initiative. "Access to healthy, affordable food should be accessible to everyone no matter their economic status. By providing access to healthy food, we can help to reduce

health disparities in these communities," said Carter. He further stressed the importance of land rehabilitation, saying, "By rehabilitating land, we can create green spaces that can be used for growing food, and this is especially important for communities that lack access to fresh produce."

The significance of the FFCF goes beyond providing space for community members to grow their own food. The goal is simple but profound: to create a sustainable food system that empowers residents - especially the Black and Asian communities - to grow their own food and take ownership of the food they consume. "We call it community growing," said Fang. Today, the FFCF feeds hundreds of families in need of fresh produce, with over 100 regular gardeners and 500 volunteers each year.

At its core, the FFCF prides itself on the diversity of race, color, language, and age. People from all walks of life converge on the farm, working together and learning from one another. Each plot tells a unique story, reflecting the diverse cultural backgrounds of those tending to the crops. "Our Black and Asian farmers farm side by side...they don't even understand each other - the language doesn't work, but they support each other," said Fang. Today, the BVHP neighborhood is 26 percent Black, 36 percent Asian, 25 percent Hispanic, and eight percent white.

Within the FFCF, Carter established the Bayview Black Organic Farmers Program (BBOFP), offering farmers plots and gardening tools to cultivate their own organic, non-GMO vegetables. The BBOFP webpage says, "Donations to the Black Organic Farm go towards purchasing gardening supplies including organic soil, fertilizers, tools, sprouts and seed, lumber, gravel, trellises, pots, mowers, wheelbarrows, and compost tumblers for our farmers." Carter wanted to heal the Black community's relationship with food and land and address the environmental and economic injustices disproportionately faced by its members. The BBOFP is a powerful catalyst for change, bridging the gap between access to fresh, organic produce and underserved communities. The program focuses on sustainable farming practices in a three-way network between residents, the farm, and food retailers. It also seeks to educate participants on the necessary skills needed for gardening and healthy living habits. The goal of the BBOFP is to empower black youth with the knowledge to grow their own food, participate in physical activities, and foster a sense of ownership of the food they consume.

Carter discussed the evolution of the BBOFP with *San Francisco Magazine* and highlighted the impact of the program during challenging times such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Carter said, "We've been able to provide access to fresh and healthy food to our local community, and it has been amazing to see how many people have been able to benefit from our work...One of the most rewarding moments was when we were able to donate fresh produce to a local food pantry so that people in need could have access to healthy food. It was an incredible feeling to be able to give back to the community in such a meaningful way." Carter's contributions within the FFCF and the BBOFP exemplify the remarkable impact that community-driven initiatives can have in fostering positive transformation within diverse communities populated by minorities and immigrants.

The impact of Carter's journey has had a profound influence that reaches well beyond the confines of the BVHP neighborhood. His fight against systemic barriers has left an enduring imprint on

San Francisco and its surrounding areas. Through his initiatives at the FFCF, he has not only provided vital assistance to individuals affected by food insecurity but also spearheaded a food distribution program that helps feed over 200 families per week and yields a yearly harvest of over 10,000 pounds. The interconnected network involving residents, the farm, and food retailers has established a genuinely sustainable food system that places paramount importance on community involvement and the promotion and healthy living.



*Faheem Carter at the Florence Fang Community Farm.
Photo courtesy of the Florence Fang Community Farm website.*

“The Bayview has been classified as a food desert by the USDA. Not enough healthy vegetables. But many people in the community call it food apartheid because a desert like the Sahara or Mojave is naturally occurring. This food desert is not naturally occurring. It is manmade. It is institutionalized. From the Community Farm’s point of view, if man can make this food apartheid, then the community can also overcome it, and so that's what we're doing,” said Fang.

Advocating for a Bayview Food Justice System, Carter established a self-sustaining model where local youth and residents could grow their own food, distribute it within the neighborhood, and enjoy the fruits of their labor at family dinner tables. The farm plays a crucial role in upholding the community’s food sovereignty by offering a food source that aligns with cultural identities and engaging communities of color that foster self-sufficiency and mutual support. “You have to have food sovereignty in addition to food security and let people take control of their own food,” said Fang. In addition, the program offers educational opportunities for local youth and adults, teaching them about the benefits of sustainable agriculture and healthy living.

Extending beyond the borders of the community farm and recognizing the power of education and intergenerational connections, Carter inspired local youth through year-round after-school STEM programs that integrated gardening and environmentalism. These programs, conducted in partnership

with Family & Child Empowerment Services (FACES SF), an institution that serves San Francisco's most disadvantaged children and families, fostered a sense of cross-cultural understanding and instilled in the participants a belief in their ability to effect change. The farm also plays a vital role in educating the younger generation about healthy eating habits.

Carter's commitment to food justice and sustainable agriculture did not go unnoticed on a broader scale. In a visit to the farm earlier this year, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi commended his efforts and recognized the FFCF as a model for community-driven change. Since its founding, the FFCF has grown to become San Francisco's largest community farm and the second most productive urban farm. It serves as a hub that connects various community organizations and residents, fostering discussions on important matters such as environmental sustainability, cultural diversity, and healthy lifestyles through engaging activities and mindful eating habits.



*Speaker Nancy Pelosi visiting the Florence Fang Community Farm in October 2022.
Photo courtesy of the Florence Fang Community Farm Instagram page.*

Carter's journey took an unexpected and tragic turn on the evening of November 13, 2022. After a normal day working at the farm, Carter was attacked by a group of gang members in the Tenderloin neighborhood of San Francisco while walking back to his car after returning from an event near San Francisco's City Hall, where he was honored for his work in the community. The incident left Carter severely injured and fighting for his life. In the midst of the assault, Carter was forced onto the street, where a vehicle collided with him and forcibly dragged him along for a distance of one and a half city blocks. The news sent shockwaves through the entire San Francisco community as the beloved activist laid in critical condition.

Carter's family, friends, and supporters rallied around him, refusing to let his mission be derailed. The community banded together following the attack and raised over \$100,000 as of June 2023 through a GoFundMe campaign. The campaign was started by his sister, Courtney Carter, to cover his extensive

medical costs. The outpouring of support – more than 1,300 donations – was a testament to the profound impact he had on the lives of those around him. In an interview with NBC Bay Area, Courtney said, “When I first heard it, I couldn’t believe it. I couldn’t even imagine. My brother wouldn’t even hurt a fly, wouldn’t hurt a bee.”

Throughout his recovery, Carter’s spirit has remained unbroken. His resilience and determination have inspired all who know him, including the students of LWHS, many of which volunteer at the FFCF and have witnessed firsthand the transformative power of his work. They rallied behind him, contributing to the fundraising efforts and ensuring that his mission would continue even in his absence. Following the attack, Katie Titus, Interim Head of School at LWHS, emailed students about ways the school community could support Carter in his recovery. Titus said, “We have been in touch with Faheem's family and are working on ways that our community can support his recovery as well as supporting the garden and ensuring that his efforts to establish networks and food security will not be eroded during his absence.” By engaging students in hands-on gardening and fostering an understanding of the ecosystem, Carter empowered them to take ownership of the food they eat, instilled a sense of responsibility, and encouraged them to work hard and be agents of change in their community. Following the attack on Carter, food production did go down a bit, but “Faheem has proteges out at the farm, and they stepped up to the plate,” said Fang.

The road ahead remains challenging not only for Carter but also for the BVHP neighborhood, as it continues to face numerous socioeconomic and cultural barriers. The BVHP neighborhood stands out as one of the most underserved and neglected areas in San Francisco, facing significant inequalities in terms of both health and economic conditions. Recent studies have introduced the term “food swamp” to describe the situation wherein food is available but often lacks qualities such as healthiness, affordability, and cultural suitability. BVHP has two federal Superfund sites and over 300 toxic locations, exacerbating the scarcity of green spaces within the community.

In an effort to address and overcome this disproportion, Carter’s mission continues through the farmers and students who carry the torch at the FFCF. The work they undertake, inspired by his vision, is a testament to the enduring power of grassroots movements and the potential for real and lasting change. Everyone is welcome at the farm, and Fang encourages people to visit. The FFCF hosts community open garden days and cultural events where members of the neighborhood come together to enjoy food, entertainment, and company. In describing the feeling of working on the farm, Fang said, “When you go to the farm, it's a joy to be there, and you don't have those kinds of spaces in the Bayview.”

Armed with relentless resolve and steadfast community involvement Carter triumphed over the pervasive injustices that haunt the BVHP neighborhood. Through his unyielding devotion to sustainable farming and food justice at the FFCF, Carter established an enduring legacy that empowers marginalized communities and individuals nationwide to envision a better future where health and equity prevail. In the midst of formidable challenges, Carter's resounding message rings clear: change starts with you.