

# INDYPENDENT READER

Baltimore

Spring 2007 Issue 4



## FOOD INSECURITY

Food insecurity refers to the lack of access to enough nutritionally adequate food to fully meet basic needs at all times due to lack of financial resources. There are different levels of food insecurity.

## HUNGER

Very simply, hunger is defined as the uneasy or painful sensation caused by lack of food. When we talk about hunger in the United States, we refer to the ability of people to obtain sufficient food for their household. Some people may find themselves skipping meals or cutting back on the quality or quantity of food they purchase at the stores. This recurring and involuntary lack of access to food can lead to malnutrition over time.

Source: Food Research and Action Center

## Independent Reader

building a new society on the vacant lots  
of the old...



### BALTIMORE INDYMEDIA

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### WHAT IS INDYMEDIA?

The first Independent Media Center was founded to cover the Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization in November and December 1999. This first IMC created an environment for independent media makers of all types (audio, video, print, Internet) to work together covering the protests in a democratic and collaborative manner. Seattle IMC was the beginning of a global independent media movement which focuses on reporting the world-wide struggle against neoliberal capitalism and a range of local issues. There are now over 130 IMCs around the world. Baltimore IMC has been publishing since July 2001.

### Independent Reader

The Independent Reader is funded by benefits, donations, subscriptions, and ads from organizations and individuals with similar missions.

### Participate

The Independent encourages the contributions of activists, journalists, and new writers. The editorial group reserves the right to edit articles for length, content and clarity. We welcome your participation in the entire editorial process.

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**Cover Photo:** Josh McGhee  
(age 12), Access Art participant.

This photo is from a series in which Josh documented the shelves and deli counters of corner stores in his Pigtown Community, Southwest Baltimore.

## This Issue:

This issue of the Independent Reader examines local food systems in Baltimore. Food is a necessity we all share, so common and everyday that it has the potential to bring us together and break down the boundaries of race, ethnicity and culture that so often keep Baltimoreans fragmented. Yet we find that food is also an indicator of extreme inequalities within our city. From Harbor East's Whole Foods to the corner-stores of East and West Baltimore, ours is a city increasingly polarized by class divisions, in which the few who can afford it have the option to eat high quality organic foods while the rest of the population has almost no choice but to live on a diet of unhealthy, over-processed, high-fat, high-sugar junk food—not to mention the tens of thousands of Baltimore residents who depend on soup kitchens and emergency food banks every week for their meals.

However, within this depressing situation there are some signs of hope. In this issue we focus on several local initiatives that aim to bring more equity to the distribution of food in our city. We talk to the Food Not Bombs collective, who provide free vegan meals twice a week at City Hall Plaza; Viva House, a soup kitchen in Southwest Baltimore that has been in operation for 39 years; and to the founders of the Donald Bentley Food Pantry, which has been distributing food to residents of East Baltimore for 17 years. This issue also features articles written by and about Garden Harvest, a 100-acre organic farm that provides free fruits and vegetables to many of Maryland's soup kitchens; the Healthy Stores Project, a campaign in East Baltimore to educate consumers and corner-store owners about nutrition; the Men's Center's Fresh Food Baltimore program, which is based on food recovery and redistribution; and Food for Life, a cooking and nutritional education program in two Baltimore K-8 Schools. In addition, Eric Imhof reflects on the politics of *how* we eat, contrasting the collective experience of eating in Nicaragua with the alienated, individualistic habits of consumption so common in the United States.

Admittedly, this issue has been a challenge for the editors. While the many problems of our local food systems could not be more clear, evaluating the efficacy of the responses to these problems becomes complicated. How, for example, can we resolve the contradiction of many soup kitchens: while these institutions provide a very real and desperately needed service, they can also be argued to compensate for the inequalities of our society and to therefore ultimately sustain them. Another difficulty has been articulating the fundamental distinction between programs which seek to radically reconfigure our food systems and the increasingly trendy corporate rhetoric of "sustainability," "eco-friendliness," "organic" and "green." It seems that everyone has suddenly become conscious of food quality and nutrition (Wal-Mart has recently introduced a line of organic foods), but in most cases this interest is primarily about public relations and marketing. All of us who are seriously committed to making our food systems in Baltimore—and the larger systems of which they form a part—more equitable, will have to constantly struggle against neoliberalism's endless capacity to co-opt radical ideas and turn them into so many unthreatening "progressive" trends.

We should all have access to organic foods, but large-scale industrial-organic farms such as those proposed by Wal-Mart fail to address the exploitative conditions of labor associated with industrial farming. Further, there are many other reasons for us to rethink our dangerously and inefficiently centralized food systems: just consider the recent *E. coli* outbreaks (the plant responsible for the spinach incident washes 26 million servings of salad every week), or the astonishing fact that in North America the average piece of "fresh" food is transported over 1,000 miles to market. These are all strong arguments for small-scale local agriculture, and indeed, the folks at Garden Harvest or at any of Baltimore's thriving community gardens realized this long ago. We are inspired by these initiatives, and we hope that this issue will inspire the reader, providing both a critical analysis of our local food systems and suggesting some ways in which we can work together to reinvent them.

—SB

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# Fighting Obesity and Diabetes

Mohan Kumar and Joel Gittelsohn

One Corner Store at a Time

Nakisa, a 32-year old single mother of two, goes to the local supermarket weekly to get her groceries—a trip that involves paying for a taxi or hack in the cold of winter. On other days, she walks to the corner-store for some quick carryout food or a bottle of soda. Often as she walks back home, she often thinks of her health and her latest visit with the doctor, who recently added diabetes to her ever-growing list of health problems which includes high blood pressure and obesity.

Nakisa could be any one of the thousands of low-income residents of Baltimore who suffer from chronic diseases including diabetes, heart disease and their complications. According to a study published in *Ethnic Discrimination*, 60 percent of adults in West Baltimore are overweight, of which over 30 percent are considered obese (1). The Baltimore City Health Department statistics indicated that heart disease was the leading cause of death in Baltimore in 1998 accounting for 28 percent of all deaths, while diabetes was responsible for 4 percent of the deaths. Diabetes rates doubled in African-Americans in Baltimore between 1990 and 1999. These numbers just scratch the surface of the issue and foretell of increasing problems in public health with one in five health care dollars spent on chronic diseases in 1998 alone.

Any one person's risk for these chronic diseases includes a combination of social, economic, genetic and environmental factors, such as access to affordable, healthy food, and physical activity, clearly play a critical role. According to the *Baltimore Sun* (5/21/02), 15 percent of supermarkets—which are often a source of fresh produce and quality meat and fish—closed shop between 2000 and 2003 leaving less than 60 supermarkets to serve more than 635,000 residents (2). As a result, low-income residents, with limited means of transportation to faraway supermarkets, rely on small local stores (3). While local stores are convenient, they offer a limited selection of foods at higher prices than



This East Baltimore Corner Store is one of the many that have agreed to participate in the Healthy Stores Project.

supermarkets. Often urban residents pay over 37 percent more for groceries than suburbanites do. More importantly, many of the small stores are filled with unhealthy high-fat, high-sugar foods.

Against this backdrop, the Baltimore Healthy Stores (BHS) project was initiated in 2005 by the Johns Hopkins Center for Human Nutrition with the leadership of Dr. Joel Gittelsohn (co-author of this article). Baltimore Healthy Stores was designed as a partnership with selected supermarkets, corner stores, and community organizations in an attempt to increase access and availability of healthy foods to the inner-city population of Baltimore. The project is funded by the US Department of Agriculture and the Johns Hopkins Centers for a Livable Future and Adolescent Health.

Baltimore possesses several characteristics which warrant initial research and assessment and the eventual tailoring of the program to the community. Significant is the role played by Korean-American corner stores, which fill the void created by the lack of supermarkets. There are over 240 Korean-American stores in Baltimore which have a predominantly African-American clientele. Many of these corner stores agreed to collaborate with the BHS program in an attempt to increase healthy food options. In addition, the Stop Shop and Save supermarket chain agreed to participate.

The BHS program goals include increasing availability and access to healthy foods to residents of the city by working with local merchants to offer healthier, affordable foods together with ...continued on next page

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## Growing Your Own Food in the City: An Interview with Larry Kloze by Scott Berzofsky

Larry Kloze is a master gardener who has worked on many community gardens in Baltimore City. Indymedia met with Mr. Kloze at his home in April 2007.

## The Iraq War and Failure of the Mainstream Media by Gregg Mosson

The recent bombing of the Iraq parliament building undermines the idea that U.S. security is improving in Iraq. How much of that will be covered by the mainstream U.S. media?

## The Zell[ing] Out of the Baltimore Sun by William Hughes

Sam Zell, a multimillionaire and "committed Zionist," will soon gain control of the LA Times, the Chicago Tribune, the Baltimore Sun, and 23 TV stations. Zell, an AIPAC supporter, has promised he won't interfere with the news sections of any of the media outlets. I think he's another Mortimer B. Zuckerman of the NY Daily News, who pushed for the Iraqi War. America—prepare for a "Dark Age!"

## Affirmative Action and the Quest for Democracy by Robert E. Birt

Michigan's recent ban on affirmative action is inspiring similar ballot initiatives in several other states, and this should be of deep concern to every citizen with a democratic social conscience. Coppin State University Humanities Professor Robert Birt argues that until U.S. citizens are ready to radically democratize the entire social order, we have a moral duty to defend and strengthen those limited achievements of reform.

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the promotion of specific healthy foods at the point of purchase. Another aim is to communicate information about healthy foods and alternative healthy food preparation methods to inner-city residents.

The Baltimore Healthy Stores program is being implemented in several phases. The first phase took place in East Baltimore between January and October 2006. The next phase will begin in West Baltimore in May 2007. Over a period of ten months, the East Baltimore project targeted specific issues of nutrition and access to healthy foods, including healthy eating for kids, healthy cooking at home, healthy snacks, carry-out food alternatives and low-calorie foods. Hee-Jung Song, a doctoral student at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health (JHSPH), led with the recruitment of the Korean-American stores, trained graduate students as interventionists, and implemented the program among the communities.

Baltimore Healthy Stores promoted specific healthy foods using print materials and taste tests to deliver messages about healthy foods. Interventionists used shelf labels, posters, educational displays, recipe cards, brochures, and flyers to promote the messages about healthy foods. Many of the posters and flyers were developed by local artists. Also, incentive cards and coupons were used to promote the healthy food items. Children and their nutrition were specifically targeted in one phase, using promotions, cooking demonstrations, and taste tests.

Several Korean-American stores lent store space to stock specific promoted healthy food items and carryout taste tests. The Stop Shop and Save supermarket also played a role by disseminating program information and hosting cooking demonstrations and taste tests in stores.

The second phase of the BHS program will reach out to the West Baltimore communities in 2007 taking similar approaches that use Korean-American stores. In addition, some African-American and Hispanic stores will be involved. Greater emphasis will be placed on the involvement of community organizations, including Kids on the Hill, and churches in West Baltimore with involvement in disseminating information, recruiting of stores, and hosting of specific activities of the program.

BHS findings will be used to develop a city-wide program for all of Baltimore in an attempt to increase accessibility to and availability of healthy foods, which could eventually serve as a model for store-based nutrition intervention at corner-stores in other urban settings.

1) Clark JM, Bone LR, Stallings R, Gelber AC, Barker A, Zeger S, et al. Obesity and approaches to weight in urban African-American community. *Ethnic Discrimination*, 2001 Fall; 21(4):676-86.

2) Klein A. Baltimoreans are hungry for supermarkets. *Baltimore Sun*, 05/21/2002.

3) Morland K, Wing S, Diex-Roux A, Poole C. Neighborhood characteristics associated with the location of food stores and food service places. *Am J of Prev Med* 2002;22(1):23-9.

Mohan Kumar and Joel Gittelsohn are participants in the Baltimore Healthy Stores Project.



The Donald Bentley Student Memorial Food Pantry 2405 Loch Raven Blvd.

## Poverty and Violence Go Hand in Hand

by Charles D'Adamo

On a warm August evening in 1989, Donald Bentley and two friends left from a party at the Wall Street Lounge near Maryland and North avenues and became the victims of a robbery attempt. The 19-year old Bentley ran and was fatally shot in the back.

Donald Bentley was a graduate of the Gilman School where he was active in the Black Awareness Club and concerned about social issues. When he was murdered he was about to return to Morehouse College, an educational institution which produced black leaders including the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., where he was studying political science.

A young man with talent and social concern struck down at a young age like so many African American men in Charm City with such a loss, what would a family and friends do?

A.J. Julius, his brother Josh, and other Gilman students responded by organizing an entirely student-run food pantry. Donald Bentley was Julius's senior advisor and an important influence. The Gilman students opened the Donald Bentley Student Food Pantry in January 1990 to honor the memory of their friend. A.J. Julius wrote to Ellen Bentley, Donald's mother, "The pantry's purpose fits a part of that memory of Donald we hold onto—a hatred of hunger and a love for humankind. Your son's name seems to belong above the door through which food will pass to hungry people."

For six years the pantry was run by students distributing to hungry residents of East Baltimore out of the building provided by Project Place, a homeless advocacy group, at 2405 Loch Raven Boulevard. The Bentley Pantry is responsible for the areas defined by the 21202 and 21218 postal codes. Until 2003 it was citywide but the number of clients became too great for such a scope.

In 1995, tragedy struck again when James Flanagan, a former client who became the Pantry's president and full-time volunteer, was murdered. The second-floor apartment above the pantry where Flanagan lived was also burned. It was at this point that the Bentley family became more directly involved.

Ellen Bentley, a former librarian and media instructor for the Anne Arundel County school system, says the pantry was serving more than 200 families weekly until US Department of Agriculture (USDA) cutbacks in October. "We're down to serving 120—150 families twice a month," she says.

80 percent of the pantry's food comes from the US Department of Agriculture, 12 percent from the Maryland Food Bank at 12—14 cents per pound, and 8 percent from the schools. The pantry has regular student volunteers from Garrison Forest Middle School, as well as Gilman. Donations of food and support money also come from the First Baptist Church on Liberty Heights Avenue of which the Bentley family is a member. Monetary contributions are used to buy food from the Maryland Food Bank. "We're expecting 11 new student volunteers from Johns Hopkins University to help us in our hunger project," Bentley reports.

### What is the situation of hunger in Maryland?

*Mathematica Policy Research* (MPR) has released 227-page report *Hunger in America 2006: State Report Prepared for Maryland*. MPR defines "food insecurity" as "limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate foods." In Maryland, 357,400 seek emergency food annually—72,100 in any given week. Nationally, hunger has increased from 21.4 million in 1997 to 25.35 million in 2006. In the Baltimore metropolitan area, there are more than 175 emergency food providers (food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters),

according to the Maryland Food Bank. The Bentley Pantry is unusual in its independence, as 77% of pantries are church-affiliated.

According to the study, which is based on surveys of food banks, 77 percent of the households served by Maryland's charitable food providers (pantries, soup kitchens, shelters) are food insecure. Among households with children under the age of 18, 81 percent are food insecure, or at risk of hunger. 48 percent of these households include at least one employed adult. 67 percent have incomes which fall below the federal poverty level for a family of four, which is \$19,356 annually. While the study does not have statistics specific to Baltimore, we can expect that the numbers for Charm City are proportionately worse. This is suggested by Baltimore's poverty rate of 18.5 percent in contrast with Maryland's overall rate of 8 percent.

Robert Bentley, Donald's father and a retired union steelworker from Bethlehem Steel who participated in the famous 1959 strike, says "the government could do more about hunger issues. We're just a two-family project here, the Julius family and ours."

In the 1990s the Bentley Pantry was open six days a week, five days as a Social Security food distribution center where clients brought in vouchers. Then the pantry had enough volunteers to meet the requirement that it be open five days a week. As times have changed at the pantry, Baltimore's urban landscape has changed as well.

In February 2007, the assets management corporation Legg Mason announced it will build a new building in Baltimore's East Harbor. Building around the Inner Harbor is continuous. But take a ride north on Greenmount Avenue, an area served by the Bentley Pantry, and look at the devastation in the neighborhoods to the east, even those neighborhoods around the area of the world-class Johns Hopkins University Medical Campus. From the 1940s to the 1970s, Baltimore was a thriving industrial city with a large number of workers, like Robert Bentley, carrying a union card and earning a decent wage. In 1957, Bethlehem Steel employed 30,920 workers and General Motors 7,000 in 1975. Today, the giant

steelworks at Sparrows Point, presently owned by Mittal Steel Company NV, employs only about 2,400, and GM is closed. Since 1960, more than 100,000 manufacturing jobs have left Baltimore.

In addition to the loss of jobs, a recent national report by The Mobility Agenda shows that over 40 million jobs, 33 percent of the US employment, pay wages at \$11.11 per hour or less, often without benefits. Rose, a Bentley Pantry client, works as a nursing assistant. We asked what her wage is. "It used to be \$14—15 per hour." She hesitated, and then responded, "It's less than \$10" at the nursing home where she now works. Rose, whose daughter is incarcerated ("God bless her," she says), has been coming to the pantry for two years and much appreciates the pantry's work.

Volunteer projects like the Bentley Pantry have responded to the effects of Baltimore's deindustrialization. As noted above, national statistics indicate an increase in hunger. We asked Josh Julius, the director and a founder whether the Bentley Food Pantry has seen an increase in clients. "I hesitate to base a conclusion for Baltimore simply on the pantry's numbers, but we've seen a steady increase."

Active for 17 years, the Bentley Pantry might go on for another 17. However, "it really needs to have a more formal connection to another entity for it to survive. We've had preliminary discussions with the Baltimore Free Store. A student club with faculty sponsorship is another option. This would return it to its student roots," said Julius.

Josh and A.J. Julius with students from Gilman School, City College, Park School, and Friends School organized the Bentley Pantry. Additional student interest came from Bryn Mawr, Mervo, Northern, Northwestern, Poly, Roland Park Country, and Towson High. The Maryland Food Committee assisted. The students looked at several areas of Baltimore in which there was need before settling on the Greenmount Loch Raven location. Their initial plans included community organizing—a Neighborhood Unity Council was formed with project ideas for tenant rights and voter registration—but food distribution remained the focus.

According to Julius no one is looking at the big picture. "The solution to poverty and hunger is not giving out cans of chicken." The Center for Poverty Solutions, successor to the Maryland Food Committee, tried to promote a more comprehensive approach, but this project recently ended.

"The federal government is sending tractor-trailer loads of food to non-profits that then serve to distribute the food to pantries and soup kitchens. But the government has no over-reaching, rational perspective on hunger problems. America has a combination of do-gooders and failed past policies," said Julius.

We asked about instituting a living wage or a guaranteed income as discussed in Europe "We barely got a minimum wage increase after 15 years. I don't see it happening politically." Julius noted that a theory exists that the work of pantries and soup kitchens is part of the problem. "If we think the government's role is to address hunger in America, but as private citizens through non-profits we address it, then we lessen the pressure on government to do the right thing!"

Historians do find a relationship between food riots and revolutionary situations. Maybe the poor and hungry need to take to the streets in mass.

February 17th, the day we visited the Donald Bentley Student Pantry, another man was found shot dead in the 3700 block of Oakmont Avenue. George Baskerville was 28, the 35th murder in 2007. According to the City Paper's Anna Ditkoff, as of February 18th, there were 36 victims of homicides in Charm City this year. Age ranged from 16 to 61, 20 under the age of 30. Thirty-one were men. Thirty-two were African American. At this rate, we can expect 239 African-American victims of homicide this year.

The founders and volunteers of the Bentley Pantry believed there was a link between the violent death of their friend and poverty in Baltimore. Like many other private citizens they make a difference. But more must be done to address poverty and its close relative, crime. And it must be done collectively and politically. And it must be done soon.

## Hunger in Maryland: Maryland Food Bank Client/Household Demographics

Category	Statistic
Number Maryland Food Bank serves weekly	50,000
Percentage of households food insecure	73%
Percentage of households with children under 18 who are food insecure	81%
Percentage of households with adults over 65 who are food insecure	50%
Percentage of households with at least one employed adult	48%
Percentage of clients served with incomes below federal poverty level	67%
Percentage of clients with unpaid medical bills	54%
Percentage of clients who rent	63%
Percentage of clients who are African American	42%
Percentage of clients who are Hispanic	30%
Percentage of clients who are white	25%
Percentage of clients who are women	53%

Note: These figures are based on 671 agencies surveyed and 411 clients interviews.  
Source: Maryland Food Bank fact sheet (2006).

# The Revolution Will Not Be Microwaved

by Eric Imhof



A field in the pineapple cooperative of Ticuantepe, Nicaragua.

Beans and rice. Beans and rice. For two weeks we ate beans and rice with every meal. Well, no - there were probably a few breakfasts in there when we didn't - but the fact that I can't remember them illustrates my point: we ate a lot of beans and rice. "The beans will give you strength," we were told. And we certainly needed it; we were working with an experienced team of gritty, bantering masons building cinder-block houses in a small rural town called Ticuantepe near the capital city of Nicaragua. Our group, which was comprised of 5 graduates from the Maryland Institute College of Art's Community Art Masters Program and 6 high school students from the Academy of Career and College Exploration (ACCE), was there for 2 weeks on a cultural-exchange / service trip through Bridges to Community, a non-profit organization dedicated to building solidarity with international communities. We worked with the masons and we ate with them - along with the rest of the residents, cooks, and children living in the pineapple cooperative where we were staying.

Along with the regularity of the beans and rice, other constants were that we always ate together, at the same times of the day and in the same place: outside on three picnic tables arranged under the canopy of a very large tree that stretched its arms and gave us ample cover when it rained (which it did, every day). We ate together, sharing food from each other's plates and, more importantly, sharing conversation and reflection. Between bites of fresh tomato and fried plantains (grown literally down the dirt road snaking through the cooperative), we

recounted our harrowing, humbling, and otherwise hilarious tales of living and working in a land far removed from the orange streetlights and hallowed row-house corridors of Charm City.

Apart from this important role as catalyst for our "round-table" reflection, the food we were eating was also connecting us to a culture and set of traditions that most of us as North Americans had never experienced before. By taking part in this daily ritual we were learning the values of this rich culture—which, because of its context and history (a story interwoven with foreign colonialism and internal revolution), is rooted in the ideas of resilience, conservation, sharing, and an awareness of social justice.

Much of this paradigm manifested itself at mealtime. By eating outside we were reminded of the origin and production of our food, as well as the farmers who harvested the food and brought it to our table. By eating collectively with the masons, cooks, and children we de-valued any social hierarchy based on nationality, race, class, or age. By practicing a ritual of cleaning our hands, setting the tables, sharing our food, and then clearing the tables we taught ourselves humility and ultimately heightened our mealtimes to the status of a special and meaningful daily ceremony.

It didn't occur to me how meaningful this was until I was back in the States a few weeks later. I remember the moment: I had come home with a to-go cup of soup from the café where I worked.

After taking it out of the microwave (although still slightly cold) and setting up camp in front of the television in my living room—still wearing my company-provided polo shirt—I stared blankly into the screen as I monotonously crumpled up crackers into the soup and shoveled it into my gaping mouth.

I was eating, sure. I was "filling up" with nutrients and vitamins and other characters from the friendly food pyramid. But I was also missing something. I was missing something truly essential. I was missing the conversation, the sharing, the appreciation: not just for the food but for the company I would be eating it with. I was missing the chance to slow down and rest my mind. I was missing the lessons of conservation, social obligation, listening, and awareness of others. These lessons all seemed to be reinforced at the wooden tables where we ate during our two weeks in the pineapple cooperative.

By chowing down my soup in a void of ritual or meaningful inclusive process with others (separating

the food from its social, cultural, and societal context), I was also chowing down a value system that belittles any kind of social awareness, traditional importance, or communal ceremony tied to food consumption. I was swallowing the values of corporate America, which sees the consumption of food as akin to the consumption of gasoline: we need to accumulate the calories needed to be efficiently productive during the work day. Period. From the point of view of the company executive, eating alone and quickly lends itself to increased profit because in the short term it contributes to worker efficiency. That is, in a very simplified model: if we can spend less time during lunch break and still pour sufficient nutritional content into our bodies to keep us functioning, then the company has gained extra productivity in the form of that additional time that we can now contribute on the job.

This method of fast, anonymous eating reinforces the bottom line of corporate industrial capitalism, which in its cold ruthlessness leaves no room for any seemingly "trivial" ritual of food consumption that otherwise connects the food to its socio-cultural context. Under the contemporary capitalist model of the United States, food is relegated to the role of fuel. It's categorized as just another cost in the "human overhead." As such it loses its importance in forging social identities or accompanying cultural traditions that engender and keep alive the values of cooperation, sharing, conservation, social obligation, and other tenets of a strictly "non-corporate" paradigm.

It is exactly this non-corporate paradigm that I found so refreshingly alive and well in rural Nicaragua. When I returned to the United States to find myself once again eating by myself in front of the television, I was forced to ask myself, "Why?" Well, if the eating habits of many Americans are dictated in a certain sense by the level of our society's industrial / technological development (and the capitalist ideology it espouses), it follows that the eating habits we observed in Nicaragua were dictated in most part by the same underlying forces. In Nicaragua, however, we fail to see the highly sophisticated level of corporate ownership that emerges from the kind of developed industrial and technological capacity that currently defines the American political-economic landscape. In Nicaragua, especially outside of the cities, we instead observed a mostly agrarian society relying on the export of its agricultural products for its economic livelihood. In the cooperative where we stayed, people took time to congregate and eat because it benefited them to pull their resources, all adding their particular crops to the collective "pot," as it were, for shared consumption (hence the beans and rice every day). They also had limited mobility due to the poorly maintained infrastructure and thus had a limited choice of venue. In other words, they usually ate together at a place strategically located within walking distance of each person's adjacent plot because without a reliable mode of transportation it was their only option. They ate together in this manner out of necessity.



Members of the Bridges to Community Group build houses in Ticuantepe.

Yet the necessities that bear the eating habits we observed and practiced in Nicaragua should not diminish the importance of the societal values that such habits support and sustain. En lieu of returning American society to a time prior to the advancement of capitalism and industrial development (which I would insist is both impossible in practice and counter-productive in theory), the most constructive thing I could suggest would be to sort out what we observe to be "culturally valuable" aspects of such eating habits and then integrate them into our own lifestyles as effectively as we see fit. One way to start is to look at the ways in which food is used ritualistically or to forge social identities in our own culture, whether it be in religious ceremony to symbolize spiritual solidarity (Christ breaking bread at the Last Supper in the Christian tradition, for example), as a cultural celebration of our prosperous history (the Thanksgiving turkey), or even as a benchmark for another year lived (the classic birthday cake). We might ask ourselves what cultural values these mealtimes teach us and then try to apply those lessons to more of our meals on a consistent basis - even if it's just once a week. One common thread seems to be that ritualistic meal implies a social setting, both in the sense that the food is shared among a group of people and in the sense that the food codifies the values of their socio-historic cultural context that are most consistent with supporting the ideals of social justice. Perhaps the next step is just trying to eat one meal a week with others, highlighting the meaningful activities of helping to prepare the food, setting the table, cleaning up together, etc. By taking this step you will not only be enriching your own life, but you'll be helping to keep alive the traditions of solidarity and cooperation that I saw to be alive and well among our "fellow Americans" to the South.



The Fresh Food van and East Baltimore's Men's Center are an important part of the project, but only community participation can make it work. photo—David Sloan

by Greg Strella

**F**resh Food Baltimore is a program of The Men's Center a non-profit program that consists of a couple of passionate volunteers and the Men's Center staff. We are becoming good friends with some amazing farmers, non-profits, community associations and emergency food providers who share our vision for a healthy, vibrant East Baltimore. Together, we are working to make our neighborhood a place where open spaces bear wholesome food and play, instead of rodent infestations and trash. We foresee a community where children once again grow up with a deeply rooted relationship with the natural world and it's bounty; a community nourishing itself with regional and traditional foods instead of settling for the processed quasi-foods that contribute to the chronic illnesses plaguing our area. To nurture this vision we are using our resources and friendships to take extra food from local growers and stores and make it available to health minded residents, residents who want to eat better, and those who are struggling just to eat. We are about to start distributing high quality food in East Baltimore.

#### The Basics

In response to the community's vision and a comprehensive needs assessment conducted in 1995 by the Historic East Baltimore Community Action Coalition, The Men's Center was created in 1999 to address the real life health and social issues facing urban men and families living in the McElderry Park area. Since that time, The Men's Center has worked with the Maryland Food Bank to regularly host food giveaways at the Center and with volunteers including students from the School of Public Health and The Nursing School to offer corresponding nutritional education programs. An expansion of these ongoing efforts, Fresh

Food Baltimore is a low overhead, volunteer driven effort to improve access to fresh, locally sourced, and environmentally friendly food in East Baltimore.

Fresh Food Baltimore picks up unsold or overabundant produce from small, local farms, family owned grocery stores and urban farmers markets. (Note "we're not here to support corporate grocers or factory farms, we're here to celebrate small farmers, family owned businesses and make their continued operation more viable.") For example, when a farmer brings 200 bunches of carrots to the Waverly Farmers market, but can only sell 100, we can use our non-profit status to offer him a tax exemption for the other hundred. Similarly, when Murry's grocery store on Monument St. receives a fresh order of broccoli, instead of tossing the perfectly good broccoli they received earlier in the week they can give it to us. We immediately give this food away through our own food distribution programs at the Men's Center or deliver it to partnering emergency food providers in East Baltimore like The Door and Bea Gatty's.

#### More than just a food recovery program

Since Fresh Food Baltimore began developing its small scale food recovery program last fall, ideas for the food have been flowing in from neighbors and community leaders. And for us, that's exactly the point of recovering food in the first place—it's easy, it's practically free, and it gives everybody involved a chance to come together around good food. These conversations have already led Fresh Food Baltimore to begin developing programs ranging from vegetable and flower gardening and dinner clubs that are subsidized with free fresh food, to a composting program that will allow us to convert

any inedible food donations into rich, natural soil to feed local Baltimore's gardens and farms.

Along with bringing this food to our neighborhood, we are using our van to transport our neighbors to local farms like Garden Harvest in Reisterstown. We are also working closely with the Mid-Atlantic Gleaning Network to take advantage of gleaning opportunities in the Baltimore area. To glean simply means to collect. In terms of food, gleaning refers to the tradition of collecting food that was missed during the harvest and has existed since humans began producing agricultural surplus thousands of years ago. In other times farmers, for moral reasons, left food in their fields for neighbors and peasants to glean. In America's current industrialized farming landscape, mechanical harvesters always leave food in the fields. Sometimes it's not economically viable for the farmer to pay to harvest the missed crop, so it stays in the field. The crop that is harvested is sorted so that only the food that looks like our preconceived idea of a potato, let's say, ever leaves the farm. Potatoes of the exact same quality, from that very same crop that are "too big" or "too small" or have an interesting shape are left in a pile in the field to rot. Mid-Atlantic Gleaning Network makes sure that this food is not wasted by coordinating gleaning events for individuals, church groups and other organiza-

tions to glean at farms. Part of the food goes to food pantries in Baltimore City, the other part heads home with the volunteers. Anyone can get involved – you won't be disappointed with the bag of food you bring back – and if you live in McElderry Park area we can give you a ride.

One of the things this all adds up to in the long term is a relationship between residents and the local farming community that is mutually beneficial. Residents have another opportunity to organize around healthy food, and farmers that know us personally are just a phone call away. Our farmers get a tax break and connect to urban residents that will appreciate their food and support them in the future.

#### **Why we can't fail (even if we fold)**

Right now, we have a couple thousand dollars from the Abell Foundation and an old van. The possibility of our van breaking down before we reach our destination is very real. We hope to prove the potential of our program this summer and apply for further funding this fall, possibly even some paid staff. But the reality is that the van isn't even necessary. It's just a tool to help our communities realize that we could be growing this food in our backyards or calling these farmers and having them deliver fresh food directly to us. We don't plan on recovering food forever, just long enough that we can collectively

recover our ability to grow this food for ourselves and make high quality, locally grown food available in our grocery stores and markets. Then we can decide whether or not we want to continue to recover food. If we do continue, it won't be out of necessity.

#### **Call for Participation**

Come April and May Fresh Food Baltimore is hitting the road full force with food recovery, gleaning, gardening and expanding. All we need now is your input, your creativity, your skills and your passion. The more voices we have to contribute and the more ears we have to listen to one another, the more bodies we'll be able to nourish. It's as simple as that. Give us a call and get involved. You'll be getting more than good food.

Greg Stella is Produce Coordinator for Fresh Food Baltimore. For more information contact him at:

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## Two City Schools Try "Food For Life" by Polly Riddims

A unique program is being piloted at two Baltimore area K-8 schools—Hampstead Hill Academy and the Stadium School. Food for Life, (a program of Fusion Partnerships) aims to study and to promote sensory-based food and nutrition education as a strategy to improve the health, academic performance, and behavior of children and their families.

Food and nutrition are often overlooked aspects of social justice. Access to healthy, reasonably priced food is not available in many poor communities. Most neighborhood stores carry only processed or fast food, which compromises the health of many residents. The National School Lunch program receives free food from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), however despite healthy alternatives in those foods, many school systems opt to use

only processed and prepared foods. Also, due to tight budgets, many kitchens are eliminated in urban school districts and food personnel are often the lowest paid employees on school staff. This has resulted in unhealthy, over processed food being served to our children every day.

Childhood obesity and juvenile diabetes are on the rise and affect poor communities more significantly. According to a recent study by University of Wisconsin researchers, more than a third of disadvantaged 3-year-olds in Baltimore and other major U.S. cities are overweight or obese. Latina/o children are at the highest risk, with 45 percent either overweight or obese. Nutrients play a unique role in terms of mind/body health, academic performance, and behavior, yet very few schools, researchers, and policy makers have addressed these issues in an

integrated manner. From a sociological, physical, and psychological perspective, obesity can be linked in varying degrees, to poor nutrition.

The "Food is Elementary" curriculum teaches students about food and nutrition through hands-on, multicultural, sensory experiences in which they prepare and taste a variety of healthful foods. Parents, food service personnel, and community groups are involved in this

study designed to promote positive behavior change. The curriculum was developed by Dr. Antonia Demas from the Food Studies Institute. Her research and implementation of this curriculum has taken place throughout the United States.

Each school has a food educator who teaches the curriculum as part of the school day. At Hampstead Hill Academy, students also hold monthly community dinners in which they prepare food for their families and neighbors. They have built and maintain a school garden, helped to paint a food based mural in the cafeteria, and started an after school culinary club. The Stadium School also has a school garden and will be instituting the culinary club and community dinners in spring 2007.

This project has the potential to save school lunch programs money with the creative introduction of the available USDA commodity foods to the classroom setting. The overall perception is that students will not eat the healthier foods, however as one of our students said: "After I tried the food, I found that just because it looks nasty, it is really very good! I didn't like all of it but I was glad that I tried it. My body felt wonderful after eating all that healthy food." (Elizabeth S., 4th grade).

Food service personnel are also included in this program. Food for Life is working to elevate the status of the cafeteria worker and help them to become an advocate for healthier food being served in the cafeteria. With additional funding, Food for Life would hope to give stipends to cafeteria workers for additional training and professional development.

Healthier nutrition for families is another goal. Recipes are sent home with students so that they can prepare meals for their families.



Hampstead Hill Academy Students in the Food for Life program prepared their first Community Dinner in April 2005. *photo—provided by the author*



As funding permits, stipends are provided for parents to assist in the classroom. This program has a positive impact on parents as well - "My experience in this class was wonderful. I learned how to eat healthier. I have learned information about other cultures and the food they eat. I learned about where vitamins go and the difference between foods. Now I eat healthier food and my body feels like it has more energy." (Cindy P, parent helper)

Food for Life received its initial funding from foundations and food donations from Whole Foods. Now it faces the challenge of finding the additional funding and support to keep the project going, and integrate it into the regular school lunch program in Baltimore City Public Schools.

Hampstead Hill Academy serves approximately 450 students in Pre-K through eighth grade, 83% of whom are eligible for the Federal Free and Reduced lunch program. While healthier school lunches are a primary goal, Principal Matthew Hornbeck credits Food for Life with "educational enrichment." As he explains it, "The program builds on what our students learn in science, math, social studies, language arts, music and art." Now the challenge is to convince the school system how important good nutrition is on academic performance and achievement so this type of program can be implemented city-wide.



"Food for Life" students at the the Stadium School.

Polly Riddims  
Fusion Partnerships, Inc.

## Garden Harvest: How a Local Organic Farm Works

by Edie Dasher

Starting in 1990, Garden Harvest, a 100-acre non-profit farm in Baltimore County has been organically producing hundreds of thousands of pounds of fruit and vegetables and donating 100% of its harvest to Maryland soup kitchens, homeless shelters, and emergency food pantries.

Co-founder Jim Dasher, who has been involved in humanitarian pursuits all his life, had an organic vegetable garden from which he would gather the excess produce and run it down to Our Daily Bread, the largest and most well-known soup kitchen in Maryland. He was shocked to see, every time he went down there, lines and lines of people, blocks long, waiting for their one meal of the day.

After so many trips witnessing this, Jim suddenly realized that the farm he co-owned with his wife Edie (author of this article) could be used to grow food for people in need. Edie, a social worker, was all for the idea, and has supported Jim in his vision by doing the office work associated with the program, and for a number of years handling and supervising volunteers.

Together, they took what some might call a leap of faith, but it was faith based on solid rationale and planning. The land and the buildings are leased to Garden Harvest for \$1.00 a year. The labor is 90% volunteer. Starting with just 15 volunteers, by 1996, Garden Harvest had over 3000 volunteers helping out, and by 2001, over 5000. Located at 14045 Mantua Mill Road in Reisterstown Maryland: The farm is an easy drive from downtown Baltimore, hence accessible to many Baltimore City residents looking for rewarding, volunteer opportunities for individuals, families, and even large groups—Garden Harvest has effectively employed 600 volunteers at one time.

Funding has been provided first from the founders, who funded it totally until 1995. Since then the program has been funded by donations made by private foundations, government agen-



cies, religious organizations, businesses, other non-profits, and individuals. In the future, a significant percentage of income will come from the production and sale of artisan goat cheese to high-end gourmet markets, while the bulk of the milk is given away to the hungry.

Delivery expense is low due to the farm's close proximity to hundreds of emergency food agencies and due to the agencies' willingness and capability to pick up at the farm. Those organizations that do not have transportation receive our produce via, A Can Can Make A Difference (one of the largest food distributors in Maryland that gives away all of its food for free), which picks up our food weekly for distribution to over 125 smaller agencies.

### The Need

There are over 35 million people needing

emergency food in the US, 17.6 million who are among the working poor with low-paying employment (as reported by America's Second Harvest 2006 study on *Hunger and U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2005 Annual Social and Economic Supplement*). The Maryland Food Bank reports over 50,000 people needing emergency food each week just in the state of Maryland who are also living below the national federal poverty line, \$1,613 per month for a family of four. Forty six percent of families have to choose between paying for food and paying their mortgage or rent, heating costs or medical bills.

Conventional food production systems are now both industrialized and centralized. This combined with low-paying jobs, lack of education and employment opportunities and the ubiquitous rising costs of living are some of the complex structural problems that reduce food security and increase hunger and poverty. Most of the food produced in the United States is from a relatively small number of factory farms located thousands of miles from consumers, in just a few, geographical areas. Any number of environmental factors can wipe out the crop in an area (frost, drought, flooding, new pest or diseases) creating shortages nationwide. Other factors can interrupt the affordability, accessibility and flow of food from one point to another—accidental or deliberate contaminants at large processing plants, precarious market economies and oil shortages. The increasing cost of oil and the eventual depletion of oil in the earth make mechanized agriculture and the transport of food increasingly costly and vulnerable. Hence any products, including food, that are transported carry that extra expense. The result is that people living in poverty, including the working poor who could just barely afford to buy their food before price hikes, must now seek emergency food.

Small, local, low-input, organic farms that produce a variety of products, along with non-profit farms like Garden Harvest provide food for the poor and compensate for capitalist driven in-

dustrial farming. With many decentralized networks of small farms in every state, there is much less risk of shortages or exorbitant pricing secondary to transportation costs. Consumers enjoy a greater diversity and availability of farm raised food at less cost. In addition to the health benefits to the consumer, methods of organic food production (which do not use toxic chemicals) help regenerate the Earth's natural resources.

#### Why Farm Animals

Organic farmers growing crops control weeds sustainably, because they till and use plastic. Plastic is an oil-based product and is not biodegradable; it can only pollute the environment and never break down. And tilling of the soil destroys soil structure, kills those tiny microbes that break down organic matter and aerate the soil. To be truly sustainable, you need to use methods of weed control, fertilizer, and pest control that in no way adversely affect the soil or

mice! A little known fact is that chickens can take out more mice faster than can cats. Guinea hens specialize in ticks. And the Khaki Campbell ducks eat all the other insects and lay as many eggs as the most prolific chicken.

So, the employment of animals for fertilizer, weed control, pest control, and even tillage augments soil health, increases fertility, and precludes the need for mechanized equipment and oil based products, saving labor cost, fuel cost, and machinery cost & maintenance.

**Milk and Eggs Program:** Besides all the work that they do that increases yield for row crops, animals provide essential protein foods such as milk and eggs. Garden Harvest does not raise animals for slaughter, as we respect all beings right to live and these animals produce plenty of high quality protein foods in the form of milk



Goats are used for their milk to make cheese and for weed control at the farm. *photo—author*

the environment. The best method we have found is the incorporation of farm animals into row crop production.

Goats, sheep, horses, cows, chickens, geese, guinea hens, pigs all perform specific jobs that save labor and cut the need for mechanized equipment and fuel. All animals contribute fertilizer in abundance. Most of them do some form of weeding: goats are excellent browsers; while they don't like to eat off the ground, like grass, they love all those noxious weeds such as poison ivy, poison oak, honeysuckle, Canadian thistle, multiflora rose, etc. After the goats have gotten rid of all the rough stuff, then the sheep come in and mow the grass down to one or two inches. Then, if you want to get down to bare soil, as we do right before we apply our mulch of cardboard and woodchips, you bring on the weeder geese or chickens. Garden Harvest specializes in small ruminants because they are easier and less expensive to care for than are horses or cows. If the soil just gets too compacted and needs to be tilled, then pigs come to the rescue. They turn over the soil in their search for roots.

For pest control, we use chickens, guinea hens and ducks. Chickens eradicate noxious grubs, borers, other insects, and mice. Yes,

and eggs. Those that do not produce food are still worth their cost to maintain by the work that they do in fertilization, weed control, and tillage. Garden Harvest, recognizing that quality protein foods are hardly ever donated to emergency food agencies, is establishing the first ever milk and eggs production and donation program. Its goal is to give out 10,000 dozen eggs and 5000 gallons of milk every year, and eventually doubling those amounts. The program is on track, having given out over 5000 dozen eggs in 2006, with enough chickens ordered this spring to meet our 10,000 dozen goal in 2007. The milk program is taking a bit longer due to the need to raise funds to construct the Grade A dairy and milk processing plant, but in the meantime, we are building up our herd of goats and sheep. The Community Food Project of the USDA has contributed approximately half of the funds needed already.

For those interested in supporting Garden Harvest through volunteering, funding, or by participating as an intern OR for any emergency food organization that is not already receiving Garden Harvest food, please visit our website, [www.gardenharvest.org](http://www.gardenharvest.org) or call 410-526-0698.

# Feeding the Hungry, the Monday Group, Viva House, Food not Bombs

by Howard J. Ehrlich

#### Feeding the Hungry on Mondays

It was Monday around 4 p.m. and by the time Big Dave had parked the pickup alongside the War Memorial just across the grassy park in front of City Hall, some thirty men had beamed in. Dave, Charlie who at 6' 4" was only slightly shorter than Dave and Ivor efficiently set up their portable table, spread a thin tablecloth, and laid out the food. Dave Greene and Charlie Swinden had been feeding people at this spot every Monday for ten years, Ivor LaBarrie for the last two years.

There was a strange silence to the assembled men and they waited patiently and quietly for dinner to be served. The menu this day consisted of a vegetarian stew with a side of rice. There was also a thermal chest filled with Polish sausage links. As the trio set up and began serving, Charlie disappeared from sight and Dave set up off to a side where he sliced some very fancy donated bread with a technique honed over the past decade. A case of apples, most of them bruised or otherwise cosmetically not your supermarket variety, sat at the foot of the table along with some tangerines. While they were serving and more hungry men came Tony C., about thirty years junior to the serving trio, joined in to help: "I enjoy helping people." "I've never been homeless myself," Ivor told me, "but I feel like I am giving something back to the community."

The men who came to eat were about 90 percent Black and most everyone looked to be in their late 30's early 40's. There was one White couple who took their food to a stairway off to a side. Most of the men would have their paper plates filled and would then walk away. Only a few stayed to eat their food there. One man took an extra slice of bread which he began feeding to large crowd of gulls that had come by attracted by the food. "Even birds gotta eat," he said.

Within about 90 minutes close to 60 people had been fed. Generally they average 50 to 100 people most Mondays. Some food is purchased at a local supermarket which Dave claims is the least expensive in the city, and most meat comes from a packing plant on Bel Air Road. Dave Greene does the cooking and uses his truck to move the food and coworkers around. He estimates that it cost them \$50 to feed 100 people.

Like other feeding programs, the Monday group has withstood the efforts of then Mayor O'Malley to close them down and move them to a less visible location. They have resisted past police harassment, but have been "victims" of the local paranoia concerning terrorist attacks. This took the form of a local bakery denying them continued access to their loading dock after 9/11.

The major domos of this outdoor soup kitchen are Charlie Swinden and David Greene. Swinden spends a good part of the Monday feeding about a block away where he solicits money from those passing by. "If they walk by and are smiling, they generally give something," he tells the story of a man who walked by frowning at them for two years. Then, one day he pulled out a twenty-dollar bill as a donation and supposedly has been smiling ever since.



Willa and Brendan prepare a traditional St. Patrick's Day meal.

For 26 years, before his retirement, Dave Greene was a professor of physics at Towson University. Since then he ran for City Council, District 4, and the House of Delegates 43rd Congressional District, and is active in the Green Party. Dave, like Charlie, takes great personal satisfaction from their work. When asked if they weren't acting as a kind of social safety valve for these homeless men and women, Charlie replied that it didn't matter if some people felt that way. "These people are hungry, and feeding them is a good thing in itself."

### Sleeping Hungry

There were 744,000 homeless people in the United States in 2005. There are likely more today. These data come from the first compilation by the Department of Housing and Urban Development in a decade.

More than half were living in shelters and a quarter were identified as chronically homeless. A resounding 41 percent were in families, although the majority were single males. While the US Congress and President Bush argue about "supporting our troops," it appears that at least 25 percent of the single men were veterans of Vietnam or of the Gulf War. One analyst, Willa Bickham of Viva House, believes that 2 out of 5 men she sees in her soup kitchen are ex-military. Some activists like Willa and her partner, Brendan Walsh, are themselves veterans of the struggles against poverty.

### Viva, Viva House

Oppositional and alternative institutions generally have a short life. The founding generation often burns out or otherwise moves to new projects. Government harassment and co-optation by mainstream groups wear people down. Typically, the next generation often lacks the zeal of their predecessors. This is not so in the case of Viva House. Willa Bickham and Brendan Walsh left the Catholic Worker House in Washington D.C. in 1968 and settled in southwest Baltimore not too far from the Hollins Market and Union Square Park. For 39 years now they have been feeding the poor and homeless in the area. They

estimate that by the time this year ends, they will have fed over one million people.

Although they are identified closely with the Catholic Worker movement, they reject the institutional church and its policies, and they are "religious" in the sense of "doing the works of mercy and resisting the works of war." Brendan adds "We are about justice, not about charity." Like the approximately 30 CW houses around the country, they subscribe to a set of political beliefs. Founded in the Great Depression of the 1930s in New York City, they are closely identified with Dorothy Day, one of the founders. These "houses of hospitality" hold to four beliefs: voluntary poverty, achievement of social justice, nonviolent activism, and personalism. "Personalism" refers to the individual's responsibility to work at the reorganization of society through personal direct action. These tenets certainly are embodied by Bickham and Walsh, and you can see them at almost any political demonstration in town.

### Volunteers, Neighbors, and Donors

While its two founders are clearly central to the survival of Viva House, there is an extensive support network backing them up—and, to set the record straight—these include atheists, Jews, and Quakers, in addition to the many Catholics and Christians of other denominations who participate. The House has the support of the neighborhood, and most who do come for a meal come from about a one-mile radius. One genuine sign of their support is "Spaghetti Days" when neighbors bring a pot of spaghetti to share with everyone.

On a day when they are serving a hot meal, and they do this twice a week, they may have up to 18 volunteers assisting. Many are college students from around the area. On the days when they are not serving a hot meal they distribute sandwiches. All told they may have as many as 80 regular volunteers. They are especially helpful in their monthly "food pantry." The volunteers assemble and distribute about 125 bags of non-perishable food once every month.

**"In a way, it's like we are returning stolen goods to people."**

On average, Viva House feeds 240 people a day. And, as you can imagine, they have changed in their operation and in the people they help and feed over their 39 years. They have held the soup kitchen in their house, converted their operation to a shelter for women and children, operated as a storefront: then they purchased the house next door and then converted it into its present form as a soup kitchen in 1987. Just as their form changed, so did the characteristics of those who came to eat. Today, it is mainly single, white men most of whom live on the street. Often they are alcoholics. (It was heroin in the 1980s and crack in the 90s.) "They really are," Willa said, "the unwanted bottom of the barrel. I am amazed at how many come limping or missing a limb, or just sickly." Brendan adds, "We are an ambulance service for the poor." Most walk in likely coming from the area. There are some regulars, and nowadays a fair number of older folks. They come for the food, of course, but for many it is also a safe place and one where they can find companionship. Often some sit around and socialize.

Central to the pathologies of the neighborhoods of southwest Baltimore is unemployment. Once the area was a stronghold of major employers: Koppers, Sweetheart Cups, Parks Sausages, Montgomery Ward, the B&O Railroad. Brendan recalls men waiting at the bus stop to travel across town to good jobs at Bethlehem Steel. They are all gone now.

Although he doesn't try to involve himself in social statistics, Brendan calculates that at various times "maybe one-quarter of the city's population has had to double up to live with friends or relatives or be out on the streets." Bickham and Walsh are very clear that the food they distribute was "taken away from the people. These are stolen goods we are returning."

### And the Rest of the Week

On Wednesdays and Sundays, Food Not Bombs (FNB) moves in to the City Hall Plaza. Their goal is "to offer food to people who might not have enough to eat." That was David Yaffe, a three-year veteran of FNB. About ten people are involved in the group with five people serving on any given day feeding 35 people. As their name reveals, they are involved in not just a humanitarian mission but in a political act as well.

Locally, FNB has been around for ten years. Nationally they began in the 1980s in Cambridge, Massachusetts as part of a major protest against the construction of the Seabrook nuclear power plant. There are now perhaps two hundred FNB collectives across the country. The groups are independent and loosely connected. They do share a basic set of operating procedures. They try to act in a nonhierarchical fashion, practice nonviolence, seek consensus in decision making, serve nutritious food, provide a vegetarian (if not vegan) menu, and offer the food free. They view hunger and the colossal waste of food as the outcome of capitalism and militarism.

At City Hall Plaza, Yaffe explains, they give people a choice of eating off genuine plates or paper plates, if they prefer to take the food to their shelter. "We try to make meals with quality, often with a complete protein. Our food tastes good."

—Also see Howard Ehrlich's monthly commentary, "The Ehrlich Report" at [www.baltimore.indymedia.org](http://www.baltimore.indymedia.org)

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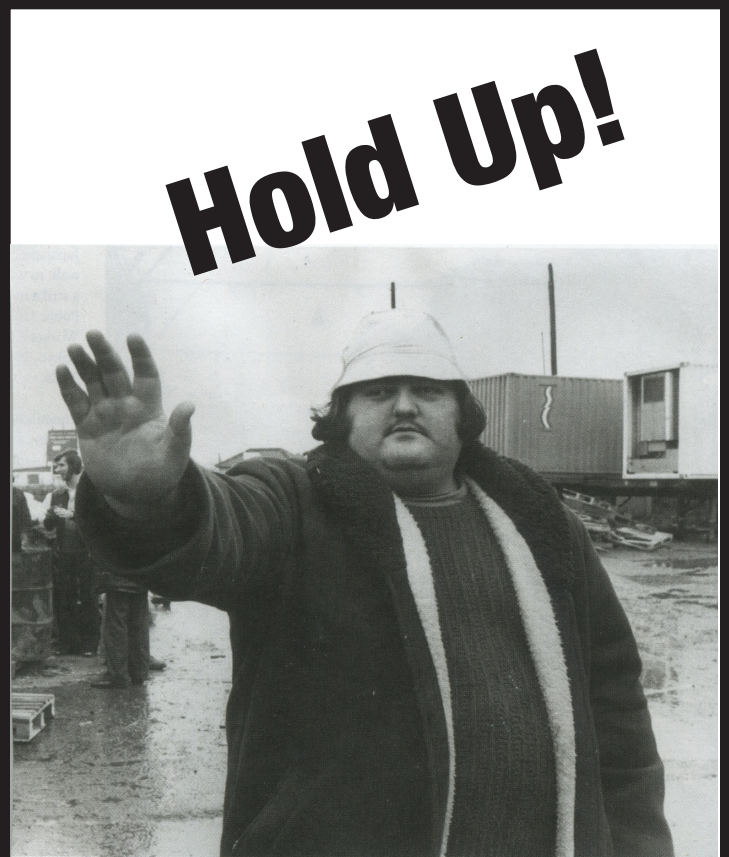
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