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## In Overtown, organic garden takes root

BY JAMES H. BURNETT III

[jburnett@MiamiHerald.com](mailto:jburnett@MiamiHerald.com)



MARICE COHN BAND / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

Peter McIntosh works at Roots in the City in Overtown.

On Saturday morning, a farmers market came to Overtown.

Children played and chased one another, careful to avoid the rows and rows of leafy veggies nearby. Passersby gawked. Shoppers, both window and sincere, browsed the goods.

It could have been your typical farmers market on a fall day -- save for the time when an elderly woman walked up to manager David Murray, bags in hand, hoping to take home vegetables she couldn't pay for.

No problem. A smiling Murray guided her to his favorite row, pointing out ``the juiciest greens you've ever seen."

The charitable gesture, which was repeated a few more times with other customers, may have put a dent in the day's profits, but profits are secondary in this case. The women and other buyers were getting the first harvest from Roots in the City, an organic garden in Overtown.

Marvin Dunn, a local historian and former Florida International University professor, launched the project in August after two years of planning, with hopes of putting vacant land to good use by creating jobs and a self-sustaining business.

The garden, at the intersection of Northwest Third Avenue and 10th Street, takes up an entire city block, with dozens of rows of collard greens, lettuce, pumpkin, tomato, papaya, orange and banana trees, and decorative flowers such as violets.

### 'IT'S ABOUT JOBS'

Seeing a garden sprout where blight once flourished is certainly pleasing to the eye, but Dunn says ``this garden is not about beauty. . . . It's about jobs."

The garden is tilled and tended by six full-time and four part-time workers, plus about 80 volunteers from the neighborhood and beyond. Parcels on the two-acre site belong to the city of Miami, the Collins Center for Public Policy and a nearby Masonic lodge.

Funding includes an annual \$100,000 grant from the city's Community Redevelopment Agency for the area, plus a one-time \$50,000 grant from Allegheny Franciscan Ministries.

And Winn-Dixie, the Jacksonville-based grocery chain, is in talks with Dunn to buy produce from Roots in the City for its Liberty City store, and possibly others in Miami.

Visit the garden any day of the week and you'll find workers and volunteers led by Murray, a longtime neighborhood resident and former farmer in his native Jamaica, and head volunteer Maggie Pons, aka "Miss Maggie," who doesn't live in Overtown -- far from it, actually, in Southwest Miami-Dade County. She rises before 6 a.m. most weekdays, ushers her children off to school and then drives more than 20 miles to Overtown to help Murray whip the troops into shape.

On a recent Thursday morning, workers and volunteers sang, smiled and joked with one another as Murray and Pons directed them: *Spread soil over this! Be careful stepping there! Handle those sprouts gently! Take a break; get some water!*

As they worked, six or eight Miami police cars raced by and stopped half a block away. Officers jumped out and drew their weapons, rounding up some young black men. "This is Overtown," Murray explains.

## HOW IT STARTED

When Dunn approached Murray two years ago about helping him launch Roots in the City, the former farmer says he was excited but also reluctant, because of Overtown's well documented violent crime problems.

"It's a tough town," says Murray, who is 59. "I asked him, why *here*? Why not out in the country somewhere, where we can really farm the way it is meant to be done? And you know what he told me? 'David, *here* is where it needs to be, so that the people here can make it theirs and appreciate it.'"

As if on cue, a young man sporting long dreads and loose jeans strolls by and drops what appears to be an empty potato chip bag on the sidewalk. Pons pounces and asks in a sweet but stern voice, "Young man, could you pick that up? There's a trash can right there on the corner. Let's keep the neighborhood beautiful."

The man pauses for a moment, confused as to whether he just heard a petite fair-skinned woman tell him what to do, before shrugging and snatching the bag off the ground. Murray chuckles.

"People care," he says. "It's that sense of ownership. It starts here and is spreading outward."

Nearby, Ferkanda Rios, 31, says she was walking past the garden just the week before when she saw her neighbors hard at work between the rows. "It made me curious. And you need to work to eat," she says. She and a friend stopped and asked if they were hiring. "We didn't know anything about gardening, but by the time Miss Maggie was done with us you'd think we were pros."

Her friend Nikki Hampton laughs and nods in agreement, sweat dripping from her forehead. "We

have learned so much on this job in just a few days," Hampton says. "There is the environment and air quality -- all that stuff improved just by these fresh vegetables and stuff. And it's healthy stuff to eat, too."

Pons had started looking for a garden-related volunteer opportunity in Miami when Dunn, who had been forwarded Pons' plea via e-mail, reached out to her.

## **SPECIAL CAUSE**

"I didn't ask, I told," Pons says of her decision to become a full-time volunteer at Roots. "This one is special, because it's not so much hobby as it is work in progress, emphasis on work. This is real work. And it will pay off shortly. The people of this neighborhood are learning this craft and loving it."

Pons stops to scold Dunn, who accidentally tramples a just-sprouting section of sunflowers.

Dunn, who now serves as Roots' unpaid executive director, tried starting the project in much smaller incarnations in different parts of Overtown for more than a dozen years. What got it off the ground this time was the sizable land-use donations from the city, the Masonic lodge and the Collins Center for Public Policy, a Tallahassee-based community development think tank which is providing the lion's share of the land -- including two additional vacant blocks that Roots in the City hopes to begin planting by week's end.

"It is an investment," says Philip Bacon, vice president for Neighborhood and Regional Initiatives for the Collins Center. "And we're excited to be a part of this. And what better use for all this land?"

Dunn says he hopes to hire more full- and part-time workers soon, at wages between \$10 and \$15 an hour.

"This kind of project has long-term potential. And I hope that it proves to be the model people are calling it right now. We would like to expand it so that other communities in South Florida will join the project and make good use of their open and vacant spaces and not be so quick to put new buildings in those spaces."

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