

Café Chez Kiva

Addressing Food Insecurity In Arkansas

“Café Chez Kiva” is a virtual cooking school and eatery. This flexible, continuing education or afterschool system is designed to empower children and young adults. Program participants learn basic ways of identifying plants and growing food, and experience simple methods of cooking fresh vegetables, while learning to plan and arrange completely wholesome meals.

Following the recent Simmons Bank Delta Economic Summit, Tom-Scott Gordon and Nancy Lee Bentley began to format this scaleable version of Nancy Lee’s Circle-Of-Three™ mentoring program as a means of creating healthier nutritional outcomes for people residing in the Delta food deserts.

The model employs a hub-and-spoke organizational structure, requiring a central meeting place such as an existing church facility with a commercial kitchen. Students will participate independently, in small focused teams, and occasionally take class field trips. Attendance is free, and the more difficult tasks are strictly voluntary. The resulting product, or outcome, is numerous small raised-bed vegetable gardens that are providing fresh food resources within neighborhoods in greatest need.

In fragile economic environments, conventional Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs, with limiting hours and rules, often do not attract sufficient interest to inspire ongoing participation. Our program differs by placing utmost importance on individual growth and health outcomes. It offers children and young adults an opportunity to engage in simple, yet challenging activities. One learns ‘to give and receive’ freely, eagerly seeking to accept special assignments, offering opportunities to experience the satisfaction/reward of “keeping their word.”

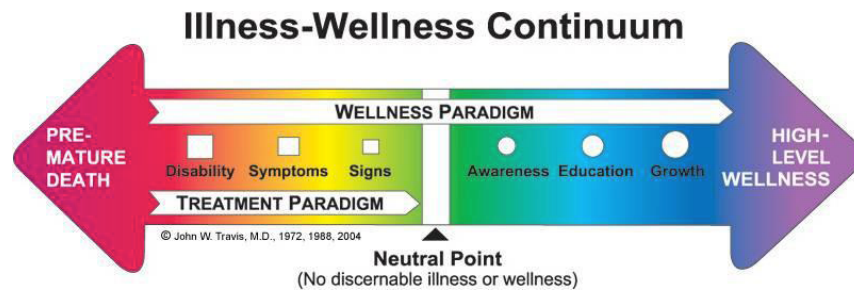
While evaluating the resources needed to achieve these objectives we remain focused on forming a entrepreneurial business that will be self-perpetuating at scale. Further investigation into Pine Bluff’s unique physical resources (such as an abundance of city owned “weed lots” and fallow garden plots,) leads us to conclude that this program offers features that Pine Bluff should not be without... The prospect of “free” food resources supplies an inviting incentive for alleviating hunger and improving nutrition. Awareness of these benefits will gradually spur economic development and diminish poverty throughout Jefferson County and the low-income Delta region.

“Childhood obesity” will be addressed, not in conventional terms of caloric-intake, but rather by collectively examining our individual tastes, cravings and perceptions, randomly bringing science to the fore in the engagement process. We will focus on peer-support, exercise, knowledge and personal choice, soliciting professional external support, and referring candidates for applicable consultations on a confidential, case-by-case basis.

Why and How the System Works

Our prime objective is teaching children to distinguish between foods that may satisfy immediate cravings, yet do not help build healthy new cells or increase the body's ability to heal and self-regulate. As students learn to identify and cultivate organic herbs and nutrient-dense vegetables, they gain an awareness of each food group and the impact food has on how well they think and feel.

The benefits of our proposed Circle-Of-Three™ mentoring platform for children and young adults of every social background are significant. Our research into proactive, integrative food and nutritional approaches verifies the therapeutic relationship between active epigenetic healing and learned principles of healthy eating. Organic gardening practice helps complete this experiential learning connection, as illustrated here:



Many productive CSA's and permaculture programs have been launched around the world. Ours is uniquely focused on supplying the education required to support a nutritional "Renaissance" among the poor. This program serves to create a circular exchange between area farm producers and market dealers, thus reinforcing our competitive ability to meet our local needs for truly healthy natural food supplies.

Food Systems Specialist Nancy Lee Bentley has been keenly aware of food insecurity in Pine Bluff for decades. In the early 1980's she was among the founders of the Arkansas Food Bank and Rodale's Arkansas Food Study. During this time she helped organize a network of food producers through Fayetteville's Ozark Cooperative Warehouse and later helped establish the first Farmer's Market in East St. Louis, which was recently converted into a critically needed, free/low cost health clinic.

Nancy Lee's The Food Circle® model enables sustainably oriented consumers to tap into today's "good food" marketplace, online and offline. Vendors can more easily market, share and certify their offerings, running more efficient, lean operations, promoting fresh local foods and value-added products through her 'Stewardship Technology for Seeding Community around Food.'

Significantly, in 2015, Gordon received a request from an affiliate of the Memphis Mayor's office to investigate a range of difficult locations and format a similar action plan for midtown Memphis. Economic realities and security needs suggested that the viability of our program was better suited to smaller communities. Our special focus is now on USDA *food deserts*—areas with very few fresh food supplies and without functioning community gardens.

Projected Financial Requirements / Pine Bluff, AR:

The initial phase requires a volunteer team of local youth and adults with general gardening and teaching experience. This group will engage in a donations drive for physical garden materials, fill dirt, compost and new/used tools. Aside from fresh foods for cooking demonstrations, the major operating expense is a commercially viable means of transportation for the various students and crew.

Seasonal activities may occur over an estimated eight-month span. Phase one projections to build the newly proposed strip-gardens could begin in the range of \$4,000 and up. We estimate 70% of this seed investment applies to direct costs for including fresh food supplies and refreshments, and roughly 30% is required to administer the project through its first complete season. Specifically, around \$600 to \$1,000 would provide sufficient crew incentives and gas for travel from Little Rock for a group of experienced people to bootstrap this pilot initiative.

Longstanding demographic issues in Pine Bluff ensure evidence of need to support this innovative gardening approach. After establishing the infrastructure, we visualize a small group of local gardeners will adopt the program through their own locally-managed, afterschool workshop and summer feeding programs. Typically, by the third growing season, gardens produce far greater yields. Exemplary food-sharing and real consideration between neighbors will demonstrate the value of sustaining or expanding these efforts beyond our original outreach.

Minimum net costs of between \$2,500, and \$3,000, could cover the basic class supplies including serving utensils, cups napkins, condiments and herbs, and raw foods for cooking demonstrations and plant starters. Such expenses will vary based on pre-existing site conditions and the total project scale. Incidentals will diminish as our efficient permaculture "food forest" propagation takes root. National feeding programs such as "No Kid Hungry," could provide front-end (box-lunch) meal supports.

With our core focus on nutrition and preventive health, leaders throughout Pine Bluff have encouraged us to pursue this targeted project approach. Community gardens have recently been effective in garnering similar volunteer labor and financial support, although most of these do *not* use low-maintenance permaculture techniques, nor do they encompass the greater community health needs, while engaging the entire range of our K-12 student's interests.