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ORGANIC GROWERS OF ALABAMA COOPERATIVE, A LOOSELY FITTED COOPERATIVE: NURTURING THE COMMUNITY AND GROWING TOGETHER

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Abstract

The age-old connection between the people and the land is something that seven women, who have organized themselves into a loosely fitted cooperative, are reviving. In the process of growing together as members of a cooperative, these women in Macon County, Alabama, are not only promoting healthy living and nurturing community, but are also addressing the issue of food security by making nutritious affordable produce and other agricultural products available to their community. Additionally, they are illustrating alternative strategies of community and economic development. This article examines why they chose the structure of a loosely fitted cooperative over a traditional or formal cooperative, how relationship building and partnering has been integral to their individual and collective success, and what their aspirations are.

Keywords: Cooperative, Women Farmers, Limited Resource Farmers, Food Insecurity

Introduction

The Organic Growers of Alabama Cooperative (OGAC), grew out of the nurturing, supportive tradition of relationship building and partnering that has allowed African American women and their communities to collectively succeed for centuries. The loosely fitted cooperative was birthed in the desire of two women beginning farmers to sell their products collectively at the local farmers market. The characteristics of the members - minority, beginning, limited resource, and socially disadvantaged - are similar to the characteristics that mark women farmers throughout the United States. The issues faced by these women farmers include: struggling to receive respect in a male dominated occupation; lack of access to land and reliable labor; limited access to farm equipment; knowledge in bartering and negotiation; program access; and building a production skill set comparable to their male counterparts.

Whereas male farmers are more likely to operate grain, oilseed farms, and livestock cattle operations, women farmers are more diverse and run not only vegetable, fruit and nut, and/or horticulture operations, but are also more likely to be involved in “other livestock farms”, or “all other crops”, which includes horse farms, hay farms, and the like. The women of the loosely fitted OGAC are representative of the trends seen in women farmers nationally (USDA, 2007).

The women of the Cooperative are part of the growth that is changing the agricultural landscape of this nation. According to the 2007 USDA Census of Agriculture, since the beginning of the Twenty-First Century, women operators of farms increased 19% - a rate of increase that exceeded the increase in number of farmers overall, which was only 7% (USDA, 2007). This growth of women in agriculture has implications for future agricultural policy. Policies that help break down the barriers faced by beginning and women farmers, such as those of OGAC are

imperative. The following sections of this paper focus on the perspectives of the members of OGAC in their own words, examining why their cooperative is loosely structured, how relationship building and partnering have enhanced their success, and what their aspirations are.

The Blueberry Lady - Josie Gbadamosi

“In the community, I am known as ‘the blueberry lady’.” Josie is part of the trend that anthropologist, Carol Stack recorded in her book, *Call to Home: African Americans Reclaim the South*. Stack argues that there is a “call to home” that many African Americans have heeded and have headed back into rural and urban communities of the southern United States. Josie heeded the call to relocate in Alabama 45 years ago. She migrated to Tuskegee, Alabama from Los Angeles, California in 1969. She attended Tuskegee University. After completing her education, she decided to make Tuskegee her home. After the death of her spouse and relocation of her children, she was faced with the decision to stay or leave and she decided to stay. This retired, widowed, blueberry farmer, with four adult daughters with families of their own, is now at home in Macon County, Alabama.

“Upon retirement in 2010, I embarked on a new career as a farmer. It was after being invited by a friend to pick blueberries in a blueberry patch that had been neglected for years that a long held fantasy to be a farmer was rekindled. My desire to locate the owner of the blueberry patch to offer to help to clean it up in exchange for the opportunity to pick blueberries, led me to discover that the property was for sale. I purchased the 46 acre property and have not regretted one day of the demanding work that the farm requires.” Josie is focused on restoring the two and a half acres of 20-year old blueberry bushes, on a site that was established in the early 1980s as a demonstration family farm by Dr. Booker Whatley, former professor at Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University) and advocate of sustainable agriculture in post WWII America. “Dr. Whatley wanted to demonstrate that a single family could generate \$100,000 per year on 25 acres of land by treating farming as a year-round business.” Josie hopes to restore the historical model farm site. “I would like for the property to again become a model farm and incorporate the use of the latest best management practices. I want to make organically grown fruits and vegetables affordable to the community and host educational and recreational agricultural programs. I also hope to connect with others who are interested in growing blueberries in order to form a co-op and sell blueberries cooperatively.”

Josie is a single, aged, female beginning farmer, with limited resources. Therefore, the need to work with others is imperative. “While working at the Macon County Farmers Market, I learned that in order to sell collectively I would need to be a member of a co-op. So, in 2012, a couple of us set out to form a loosely structured co-op as required by the Farmers Market Authority. We were quickly joined by others, under the leadership of Decetti Taylor, a Tuskegee University Cooperative Extension employee.” The group has become more than just a marketing co-op. In addition to providing moral and emotional support, members have helped each other with clearing and cleaning their land. “As a result of being a member of OGAC, I have attended several conferences and workshops on scholarships, and purchased a ground well at a discount price because I was part of a group having wells dug around the same time.”

Josie is entering her fourth year with the group and is encouraged about their potential. “The group realized that given the fact that most of the members are beginning farmers with other jobs, we needed to be realistic in our expectations. We realized that we had many needs and

challenges before we could grow products to market at the Farmers Markets.” The members of OGAC agreed that they would attend the already established Macon County Farmers Organization (MCFO) meetings to get help in addressing some of their needs that were beyond the scope of OGAC. “Several of our members have become members of the MCFO.” This relationship with the formally structured farmers’ organization is a symbiotic one. The farmers’ organization was in need of increasing membership numbers, and also, it had no female members. MCFO gained both attributes; it increased its numbers and gained more women members. The women of OGAC also gained from the formal structure of MCFO through more formalized technical assistance.

OGAC is a labor, sales and marketing cooperative with the objective of meeting the needs of their members by helping them to overcome the barriers that affect women in agriculture and beginning farmers. The term “loosely structured” is used because the OGAC is not formally organized as a co-op; it is a relaxed, informal cooperative organization. The members are interdependent beginning farmers who are “not trying to make a name for themselves, but are just trying to make sense out of their small farms.” Individually, they do not have the manpower and resources needed to expand and maintain operations; however, together they meet each other’s needs for labor, marketing and sales assistance. As they proceeded, they learned that to formally establish an entity, and a system for doing this required more time and resources than originally conceived. Given the life circumstances of members - several had full time jobs, children, and some were caring for elderly parents - they decided to look for a better structure to fit their needs. Not having the resources to move forward, but having the advantage of a formally structured local farmer’s organization that they could work with, benefited the group tremendously.

Advisor and Mentor - Decetti Taylor

Decetti, who functions as the advisor and serves as the group’s University link, became part of the co-op through her job as the Project Manager for the Beginning Farmers and Ranchers Program for Tuskegee University’s Cooperative Extension Program. “As an advisor and mentor for the cooperative, it was my goal to help each individual farmer to conquer her fears and to see the benefit of her gift to the group. Each member has a different life path and different reasons for joining; so the idea was that each one would help one, in order that each farm or idea would grow. I hosted on-farm demonstrations and classroom trainings for the members of the group to gain exposure and so they could benefit from hands-on technical assistance; it was also a way to help them to practice public speaking. We were even afforded the opportunity to do some field visits around the state to see what and how other niche producers were doing. In the mist of the mentoring and advising I saw an opportunity to live out a childhood dream.”

Decetti’s family instilled in her the understanding of the economic benefits of farming, so she studied agriculture in school. Her goal was to become trained so that she could take her expertise back home to benefit the family farm. “Like many family farmers, when the elders of the family pass away, so does the family farm. But my father kept things going, with a majority of his focus on cattle production. I always believed that we could earn enough from fruit and vegetable production to live on. So, in 2012, I took a membership role in the co-op with the idea that I could revive my family farm with the same programs and technical assistance that I had been advising other farmers to take advantage of.”

In 2013, Decetti courageously began a vegetable garden on her family farm. Using a well, plasticulture irrigation system and donated plants, she began her journey as a young beginning farmer. The adventure proved arduous, “the challenge of managing crop production, a full-time job, pastoring full time, and being a sole parent, led to fatigue and burn-out.” Decetti has over 1,000 strawberries in the ground and with the support of the cooperative, she hopes to get plastic cartons for packaging and learn from other members how to get into the local grocery stores and also sell her produce as part of the group’s products at local markets. “As a beginning, young, female farmer, what I have gained personally from the cooperative is the wisdom that time is too precious to try to navigate everything you need to know alone.”

The Honey Lady - Susan Barnes

Susan Barnes, a retired Registered Nurse, is a chicken and bee farmer who sells eggs and raw honey. Susan’s goal is to expand her small apiary to be able to supply honey year round. She makes soap, lip balm, collects honey from the bees, and makes preserves from local fresh fruit. Susan has deep roots in Macon County, Alabama. Both her parents graduated from Tuskegee Institute. “In 1965, my father, who was a WWII veteran, teacher and electrician, and my mother, a home economist, decided to become missionaries to Africa. They were the first African American missionaries in the Presbyterian Church, USA. Thus, I graduated from high school in the Congo and set out for Tuskegee Institute for college. During college, I transferred to the University of Michigan where I received my degree in Nursing, married and had four children.”

When Susan’s father passed, she moved back to Alabama to live with her mother, and began her journey into farming. “My mother and father owned 47 acres in Macon County and I eventually moved back to that land. My mother and I did some subsistence farming and enjoyed the fresh vegetables and eggs that resulted from our modest efforts.” However, Susan was encouraged by her oldest daughter to move into bee farming. Her daughter wanted to buy land, plant blueberries and experiment with bees to collect blueberry honey. Susan suggested that her daughter just use the family land in Macon County, and her operation, Abi Bees, which is named after her daughter, Abiola, began. “Soon, people in the community began recognizing me as the Honey Lady. I am intrigued by the productivity of bees - they actually work themselves to death! Honey is the purest and natural food source ready for consumption.”

In 2010, Susan began selling her products at the Farmer’s Market in Tuskegee. “I didn’t know the first thing about how to run a business, but I received a crash course from the Blueberry Lady, Josie; and Decetti’s advising and mentoring was a life saver. Josie and I helped each other and did so well with our produce that we wanted to share our ideas, experiences and failures with other women, and talk about how to improve and increase our supply to meet the demand for our products without short-changing ourselves. As we shared our knowledge, more women came and joined us and we began meeting for lunch. Sometimes we congregated at one another’s homes. We discovered that we were such a unique and cohesive group that we decided to become a co-op.”

Their loosely fitted co-op brought them together “to help one another in the good, delicate, and rough times in farming.” Susan believes that the loosely fitted co-op, “worked because our rules were not written down on paper but our verbal communications and actions among and with each other, set the stage for a powerful cohesive group which has allowed us to move forward in

miraculous ways. Our commitment and loyalty came from within ourselves. We have encouraged and motivated each other. Our supporting efforts and our being there for each other provides the confidence to press forward in fulfilling our assignments and commitments with ease and without stress.” Each member brings to the table a trade, career or skill, which benefits the co-op and its members. “Our love for what we do and the desire to provide the best quality produce, has strengthened and bound us even closer. Through trial and error, because of our cohesiveness, we were able to rise above the problems, failures, and disappointments that cause many starter groups and organizations to quit.”

The group shares ideas, helps one another do research, and seeks information that will help with sales and marketing of their products. However, what is clearly very important is the nurturing and emotional support that the women give one another as well as the labor they provide one another. “Being there for each other with hands-on labor needed to improve farm operations allowed us to gain the experiences needed and to be able to participate in various activities and projects in Agriculture that provide the technical assistance and helps us add value to our operations.” The members help one another to clear land, plant crops, market their products and expand operations.

“Along with farming, other members have started hoop houses, chicken farms, apiaries, and have added value to their agricultural enterprises. Members also have been able to improve sales and marketing of their produce; some make massage oils with the herbs they produce as well as natural herbal teas, soaps, and much more. The potential to excel is unfathomable. Our determination and genuine support of the co-op, combined with the different areas of expertise that each member brings, allows us to share our knowledge and produce with the community, schools, and farmers market. As a co-op we make time to regroup, have conference calls to discuss areas of needs and celebrate each other’s progress, find solutions to questions and help each other solve problems. Being a loosely fitted co-op has kept us functioning and still in existence.”

The Green Acres Dreamers - Wendy and Henry Williams

Educators, Wendy and Henry Williams, reside in Tuskegee, Alabama. They are proud natives of both Russell and Macon Counties. They have been married for three years, have two sons and are proud grandparents. Henry is employed with the Phenix City Board of Education and Wendy, who teaches kindergarten, is employed with the Macon County School System. “Henry and I have the desire to live out the Green Acres (comedy show) dream. We plan to move to the country to enjoy “fresh air”, animals, fruit trees, and farm. Our dream is to live off the land. Our journey to becoming ‘semi-farmers’ or gardeners started a few years back when we were searching for blueberries. We found Josie’s blueberry farm which led us to inquire about land development and being resourceful. We wanted to grow healthy food in our own back yard and we did.” The first year they planted they were overwhelmed with the abundance of produce; however, the next year their crops were not as bountiful due to pest management challenges. “We found help along our journey to become better gardeners through OGAC. It provided a wealth of information and introduced us to other resources that have been beneficial to our growth in gardening.”

Daughter of the Soil - Cheryl Parker

Former mortgage loan broker, Cheryl Parker, moved to Macon County in 2009 with a definite plan and purpose. “After being in the mortgage loan business for over twenty years, ten of which I had my own company - the market crashed, a lot of lenders closed and my business was negatively impacted. I was allowing this to affect my health and I decided to let it all go and to get back to nature, something I have always wanted to do, even as a child. My childhood memories of visiting Macon County came flooding into my mind and I decided to put roots down in Alabama. I knew nothing about farming but positioned myself to learn which I am still doing.” The OGAC was a natural fit for Cheryl. She met the members of the co-op at various times and in various ways.

“I was so impressed and in awe of what the members of the co-op were doing. Jan [Jan Garrett], one of the co-op members, with her organic farm is where I spent many days helping and I learned so much from her; Josie’s story of her blueberry farm is just amazing – how she leaped out on faith and obtained the property; Susan with her bees and many products; Asabi with her aspirations and gifts; and Decetti with her assistance, knowledge and connections. I knew that these were people I wanted to be in partnership with to serve the community, not only through teaching about our connection to the land, but by providing nutritious food and sharing information that promotes healthy living. It is interesting working with others toward a common purpose. I have learned that it takes time and consideration of all members. I can be hasty and just want to get things going without always planning. I pretty much feel that everything will fall into place. My experience as a member of the co-op has been a positive one. I have grown in the area of learning how to work with others, learning to take everyone’s opinion into consideration, and having patience with others to work through the kinks. I have no doubt that our co-op will be a success and that everyone of us, in our individual ways, is working toward accomplishing this goal.”

Conclusion

Not only does this co-op demonstrate the efficacy of co-ops in addressing food security issues, but it is also a good example of how these types of groups can contribute to community development. Historically, cooperatives have been used as an alternative community development strategy (Carnales, 2010); particularly, in rural communities, where economies have suffered from lack of economic diversity and opportunities. Not only do cooperatives provide a framework for local community based investment, but they also “complement economic development,...establish local channels of communication and enhance local decision-making” (Brennan et al., 2005). Cooperatives fit the existing economic landscape of rural America given the fact that agriculture and tourism have been major factors in their economic development (Brennan et al., 2005; Blakely and Bradshaw, 2002).

The women of OGAC are part of the significant change that has been moving through American culture for some time now – women shattering historical stereotypes and roles and providing leadership in fields that are historically non-traditional for them. Strong gender norms have previously precluded women from taking substantial leadership as farm operators in the past (Tickamyer and Henderson, 2003). Now, they are helping to lead the way in the organic and sustainable agriculture movement in this country. Particularly, for women in rural America, like

women elsewhere, their roles continue to change; however, there is continuity in historical roles as well as restructuring of social and economic factors that affect their lives.

The restructuring of the rural economy has both spurred and responded to the growth of rural women's entry into the paid labor force...Also, the growing numbers of women in single and single-parent households reflect family and household restructuring throughout society. Rural women, like women everywhere, continue to face the quandary of a double or triple day as they engage in both paid and unpaid labor, including income-earning activities in formal and informal sectors, household and family maintenance and reproduction, and community-sustaining activities (Tickamyer and Henderson, 2003, p. 110).

There is significant continuity in rural women's roles in historical food and fiber production - as laborers, not as leaders as they are today in appreciable numbers. Rural and national policies must keep pace with the winds of change that are moving through rural America and the nation, as non-traditional leaders gain ground in providing access to healthy foods in rural communities like Macon County, which suffers from lack of access to nutritious, fresh foods.

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