I Had a Farm in Atlanta

BY JOHN T. EDGE

The van is white, like all the others, with four rows of vinyl bench seats and door handles that rattle when we crest speed bumps or brake to stops alongside clutches of dumpsters overflowing with debris. Other vans, parked in the blacktop lots that encircle the Indian Valley apartment complex on the northwestern fringe of Atlanta, are taped with precise blue script. Chin Community Baptist Church drives a white van. So does Matupi Christian Church, and Georgia Chin Baptist Church. But this white van, packed with recent refugees from the East African nation of Burundi—driven by a onetime hospital chaplain who came to Atlanta to attend theology school—does not declare denomination or ethnicity. Nor does it telegraph the riot of colored garments worn by the women within, or the patchouli of sweet and dusky vapors that trail from the rear luggage hutch.

We turn into another two-story complex, Southern Place. With a clapboard and brick exterior, and a unit numbering system seemingly based on a long disproved algebraic theorem, it resembles the on-the-cheap developments that every other girl I dated after college lived in. Apropos of its setting, west of Stone Mountain, the granite monolith incised with portraits of *our fallen Confederate heroes,* the sign out front boasts a relief carving of a columned manse that, in the afternoon light, looks a lot like Tara.

Jeanne Niyibizi slides an aluminum pan, sloshing with roasted goat bathed in a brick-red sauce, into the luggage compartment. Hiking up her yellow and green batik dress, she vaults into the van, where Donate Nyiramanzi and seven other women—all wearing solar flare-bright garb, many packing stews of yellow peas with yucca or piles of bananas fried in palm oil—will chatter in Kirundi, their native language, until we reach our destination, a fundraising dinner, staged in the Tudor-styled home of Susan Pavlin, director of Global Growers Network, a three-year-old farm-focused nonprofit that serves these refugees and 200-odd more. Before the night is out, I will eat six or eight ginger-stuffed dumplings called momo, made by Kesabi Timsina, a Bhutanese woman who farms an outparcel of land that fronts North Dekalb Mall. I will handle a market basket crafted of kudzu and wisteria by her father, Ram, who does his best work on the stoop of their butt-sprung, wood-framed apartment complex. And Global Growers will raise enough money to pay for a growing season's worth of transit passes for the men and women who benefit from their nascent farm and market initiatives.

At the close of the party, I will stand before the crowd to say that, at a time when every kid under thirty seems to preach the virtues of a farm-to-table lifestyle with an earnest, finger-wagging fervor that makes me want to reach for a bag of Flaming Cheetos and a Mountain Dew, I've glimpsed an urban gardening initiative that makes good on its promise of connecting real people with real food.

Semtok, a globular eggplant also known as bitter ball, is a hard sell, but occidental farmer's market devotees like me enjoy sour leaf, an herb in the hibiscus family, also known as roselle. We also like mustard greens, and okra, so long as you pick the pods when they are still young and tender. Those are a few of the lessons the Burundi women have learned since 2010, when they began working a plot of soil they call *Umurima Wa Burundi,* the Burundi Women's Farm.

Working with Global Growers, a spin-off of the 10-year-old Decatur-based nonprofit Refugee Family Services, the Burundians have also learned survival skills like how to score a second-shift job in an upstate chicken plant, pulling viscera from feather-stripped carcasses. And how to navigate MARTA, a sprawling multimodal transportation system that Atlanta recidivists fought in the 1970s, labeling it, with an eerie sense of its present potential, Moving Africans Rapidly Through Atlanta.

Climatic complements, cultural ties, and transportation link the American South and Africa. Fittingly, Atlanta is now a beacon for African refugees, just as St. Louis hosts a significant population of Croatian refugees, who arrived to join earlier immigrants from the former Yugoslavia, and the foothills of North Carolina boast pockets of Mung people, accustomed to farming similarly hilly terrain. Resettlement agencies place three to five thousand refugees here each year, I learned over two days of bounding through Atlanta, visiting four farm sites managed in whole or supported in part by Global Growers. About half of those refugees are children, who seem to live their lives in apartment complex parking lots, where they dodge cars while booting soccer balls.

Clarkston, near Stone Mountain, is a dizzyingly diverse place. A bungalow-and-strip-mall suburb, it's no longer the domain of the white, working-class factory workers who flocked here after World War II. Now, in one square mile, people from sixty different countries, speaking twenty-six different languages, live. And they garden.

Three blocks from what was once Clarkston High School and is now a community center that hosts citizenship clinics, contra dances, and tai chi classes, I walked, with two Global Growers employees, along a rock-strewn trail to the Clarkston International Garden. Chrissy Bracewell, wearing a hoodie and hiking boots, studied experiential education at Brevard College in North Carolina and now uses cloud-based mind-mapping tools to help refugee farmers plan for self-sufficiency. Basmat Ahmed, wrapped in a purple turban, is a Sudanese refugee who grew up in Egypt and now says things like "We're growing the revolution" with a brightness that tells me she doesn't plan to overturn anything but topsoil.

Like all of the farms I visited, this is a squatter's plot, awaiting its true purpose. Twenty-six families from ten different cultures till this red clay half-acre, tucked into the Forty Oaks Nature Preserve. Bhutanese work with Sudanese. Sri Lankans work beside Iraqis, who work beside Somalis. And so does a group of five blind and sight-deficient farmers who call themselves the Tactile Growers. In a garden where plots are often marked by bamboo trunk borders, the Tactile

Growers stake their land with concrete blocks, which are easier to grapple in the dark.

The work of Global Growers relies on the buy-in of enlightened developers and engaged bureaucrats. A windmill-tilting nonprofit, operating on a $250,000 annual budget, can't afford to purchase land. With only two years of operations behind it, Global Growers has not yet built a base of donors who might bequeath land. So they squat, with permission.

The land they farm at *Umurima* in Decatur is owned by a mixed-use developer. Through the trees, beyond the patch where the Burundian women grow scimitar-shaped, crimson-colored okra, I spied a Jazzercise studio, part of a complex called East Decatur Station. Opposite, a veterinarian boards dogs that bay like their country cousins on a morning hunt. As the hounds reached for new octaves, and the traffic thrummed by, I listened to Venance Ndayiragije recount the losses that compelled his emigration: Two brothers. His mother and father. His grandfather. And three uncles. "My people are Tutsi," he told me. "And they were Hutu," he said with a finality that brooked no explanation. As he toed the dirt, Venance looked up and smiled. "I have seven children here," he said in a mellifluous broken English that improved on the original. "I married my wife. We have lots of children, so that we forgot my family that died."

Before too long, these patches of red dirt will beget a brace of condominiums. Or a fast-casual restaurant. Or a twenty-four-hour oil-change drive-through. But for now, they're farms, tilled by people who farmed back in their homelands and arrived here in Atlanta full of hope that they might get to grow and harvest again.

Bamboo Creek, Global Growers's fourteen-acre training farm, tucked at the rear of a cul-de-sac in a Brady Bunch-era suburb of split-levels gone thoroughly multicultural, feels similarly liminal. To access the parcel, bisected by a stream, bordered by a thicket of bamboo, Global Growers leases the house. Use of the land, a former horse farm, comes free, so long as they keep the bamboo at bay. It's a sweetheart deal for a nonprofit that encourages its farmers to fashion trellising and fencing from bamboo. But it's temporary, like the plot set in the floodplain that girds North Dekalb Mall, where the Bhutanese family turns the dirt, and the plot behind the United Methodist Children's Home near Decatur, where Global Growers hosts more than thirty farmers from twelve different culture groups who use a keyline farming methodology, developed in Australia, to maximize water retention.

Walking the grounds of the former orphanage with Susan, we talked of Bhutanese refugees. "They're good stick-in-the-ground farmers," she said. We talked of the broader possibilities of raising goats, taking note of the recent explosion of interest in charcuterie and salumi and the prospects for refugee-produced cured goat-meat products that might or might not be saleable to mainstream American consumers. When we passed a wood frame workshop, set at the fringe of the old orphanage, in sight of a lake ringed by a once vibrant apple orchard and blackberry bramble, I stopped to examine a pile of junk, recently tossed into the weeds. Alongside a portable basketball goal, with a broken mainshaft, and a ruined bassinet, was a jumble of hand-painted signs. Susan said they had been cast aside after a recent theatrical re-creation of the Underground Railroad. I read

"Decatur's Kitchen Garden" (2012) by Beate Sass them as a kind of roadmap for the future. One said PLANTATION. Another, painted with an arrow, pointed the way to FREEDOM.

For the longest time, the South, famous for its magnolia-shaded verandas and dulcet hospitality, was, in practice, inhospitable to outsiders. Some of that was societal and purposeful. I'm thinking of the nativist movement, which gained gnarliest flower in the 1920s, as the Klan rose again to prominence, burning crosses on Stone Mountain, among other places. Some of it was rooted in economic and political realities. Without manufacturing jobs to lure new immigrants, without unions to protect workers' rights, the South was a place that, when compared to the rest of the nation, did not draw newcomers into its orbit. Until the latter half of the twentieth century, the South pushed rather than pulled.

Across the twenty-first-century South, refugees now work community farms. Their narratives—of government-endorsed genocide, of families riven by petty bureaucrats and monetary market vagaries, of lives forever on the run—are exceptional. But their work is comparable to that of the brogan-shod men and women who have long cultivated Southern soil. In Houston, Congolese refugees and others raise radishes, greens, and more on plots secured by Plant It Forward Farms. In suburban New Orleans, Vietnamese levee- and terrace-croppers began farming Gulf Coast lowlands in the 1970s, soon after Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese. Meanwhile, in metropolitan Atlanta, Global Growers has begun a CSA program, in which the Burundian women grow food to share and barter among themselves—and also to sell, through seasonal subscriptions, to pasty white people like me.

My visit coincided with the last harvest of the fall season. Like any good nonprofit administrator, Susan was circumspect about whether the CSA had really worked for the women. Was it merely a grafting of an American ideal? Did it serve the women and their communities or model current Western notions of what progressive agriculture should look like? Susan wants to get it right. And so do all the women who work with Global Growers, from Karen Mann, the lapsed divinity student, to Basmat, a Sudanese refugee.

A few years ago, a student from Arkansas enrolled in graduate school at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, at the University of Mississippi, where I work. He had some experience running a community garden and wanted to apply that work to his studies. For a while, with a little funding from the nonprofit I direct, he ran a community garden at the Boys and Girls Club in Oxford. One afternoon, I talked with a couple of colleagues about his progress and the prospects for a CSA in Oxford. (Three CSAs now operate in the area; at that time there were none.) We talked about the usual stuff: Would the work continue after the student graduated? If the project was successful, where could we source additional funds for expansion? I used the term CSA twice, when talking about the possibilities. One colleague nodded. The other, an historian, arched an eyebrow. After I explained that the term referred to community supported agriculture, he told me that years of graduate history education had conditioned him to think of the Confederate States of America when he heard that acronym. Knowing my intolerance for neo-Confederate bluster, he was surprised to hear me speak of the possibilities of a CSA in twenty-first-century Mississippi. That exchange, it now seems to me, signals the potential and progress now manifest in the work of Global Growers.

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