

Conversations on Food Justice: Food as Fuel for the Movement

November 18, 2022

IN A NUTSHELL

Storytelling is natural when people gather. We can often see this when working with food, whether it is in a field or garden producing crops, or gathering around the table to share a meal. These times present an opportunity to share experiences and perspectives, and fuel new ideas and connections.

Ms. Virginia Ali of Ben's Chili Bowl in Washington, DC recalls a time when sharing a Sunday meal could foster connection as well as mutual aid, mobilizing community members to help others who need extra hands with a harvest, or gathering funds and resources to help families who might need a helping hand. Dr. Monica White of the University of Wisconsin-Madison takes a more academic approach of gathering oral histories to elevate the stories of those whose voices are missing in the history we are most familiar with.

During this session of Conversations on Food Justice, hosted live at the Aspen Institute in Washington, DC, we hear more about how food has fueled movements like the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s and a more modern Black Freedom movement.

KEY TAKEAWAYS/QUOTES

- **“Never reduce your dreams to the level of the event, which is your immediate experience.”** - Howard Thurman. Elliott Gaskins kicked off the session with an invitation to consider this quote as we heard stories from Virginia Ali and Dr. Monica White, remembering that a single moment is not representative of an entire life.
- **Historically in indigenous North American and African cultures**, story tellers have been one of the most important and honored roles in a community. In Western Africa, these community members were often known as *Griots* (gree-ohs) and the tradition continued as Africans were sold as slaves in the Americas. Griots held and shared knowledge and history through stories that were sometimes days long, ensuring that records were held and shared through generations.
- **Virginia Ali opened Ben's Chili Bowl with her husband, Ben Ali, in 1958.** Ben was born in Trinidad and studied at Howard University with aspirations of becoming a dentist. One year after meeting Virginia, he proposed that they open a restaurant together in then-segregated Shaw neighborhood, building on his experience working in kitchens to fund his education. They started simply – with a spicy chili mix that was served over hot dogs or their famous half-smokes.
- **During the Civil Rights movement, Ben's Chili Bowl was a gathering place for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other activists.** When Dr. King was assassinated and the city shut down due to the resulting riots, Ben's Chili Bowl stayed open and served first responders, law enforcement and activists alike, serving as a safe place to try and come up with a solution for the city.
- **One of the most important tenants of the Ali family was to care for their community.** This value can be clearly seen when looking at Ben's Chili Bowl over the years – they strived to provide reliable jobs for community members, and often gave out food to those who could not afford it at the time. Community care works in both directions, and that same community came together to keep Ben's open during years-long construction during the 1980s and they had financial support come in from all over the country during the early days of COVID.

“If you treat people the way you like to be treated, every day, whatever their place in life is, and you’re serving a delicious product, you can manage to stay there 64 years like I have” *Virginia Ali*

- **Agriculture and food are often overlooked aspects of the Civil Rights Movement.** We often hear about the Great Migration from the perspective of those who left the south in search of more opportunity and freedom in the North. Dr. White interrogated the gap that was left behind in these stories – that of those who stayed and made a life in the South.
- **Agriculture is a strategy of resistance that communities can support each other and find self-efficacy.** In cities like Detroit, Madison and New York City, urban agricultural movements have helped to fill a gap in access in areas where fresh, healthy, culturally appropriate food is often too expensive or simply not available.

“When people grow food, that is a constructive strategy, and it is a matter of taking what we have access to and creating and building something that had been... in disrepair in some of the neighborhoods, and some of the lots were vacant. And so what was really beautiful was in terms of asking questions not just in this current moment, but in what other ways have we seen as agriculture being central, particularly for African Americans. And what I can say is historically, when we’ve had an economic downturn, African Americans have turned to food as a strategy of resistance and resilience. And what does that look like? Well, for Winnie Mandela, she would say that they would meet and talk about the anti-apartheid protests in the garden. Well why the garden? Because ... nobody questions folks in the garden, in a growing space.” *Dr. Monica White*

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- SEEDS OF HOPE
 - **Ms. Virginia looks to future generations** to find ways to reconnect and demonstrate community care in the modern age. She is optimistic that they’ll be able to do it even better than her generation did.
 - **All of the agriculture programs Dr. White has visited have youth programs** where children can learn how to grow their own food. This is huge both looking forward at the future of agriculture but also in the now, since children who grow food [eat more vegetables](#).

We all drink from wells we didn’t dig, are warmed by fires we didn’t kindle, are nourished by harvests we didn’t cultivate, and rest under the shade of trees we didn’t plant.

CONTINUED LEARNING



Read about the history of Ben’s Chili Bowl in this [Time Magazine article](#)



[Learn more](#) or visit Ben’s Chili Bowl if you’re in Washington, DC



[Read or listen to more](#) from Dr. Monica White



Read Dr. Monica White's book [Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement](#)



Get involved in a local [community garden](#)



Advocate for voting rights, including ensuring voters have access to food and water during elections



Keep an eye out for Dr. White's upcoming book "We Stayed: Agriculture, Activism and the Southern Black Rural Families Who Fought to Keep the Land"

FEATURED PANELISTS

Virginia Ali with her husband, Ben Ali, the doors of the now iconic Ben's Chili Bowl on August 22, 1958. Today, over 55 years later, this institution has become a place of fond memories for countless friends from DC, Maryland, Virginia, and all around the world.

In addition to all the hours she has put in at Ben's Chili Bowl, Virginia has also made time for many other meaningful endeavors. She has served on the Board of Directors of For Love of Children, The Thurgood Marshall Center for Service and Heritage, the Islamic Society of the Greater Washington Area, and Cultural Tourism DC among others.

Over the years, Virginia and Ben have received countless awards and accolades including the prestigious America's Classics Restaurant Award from the James Beard Foundation. They were inducted into the DC Hall of Fame in 2002 and were later given the Key to the City by Washington, DC Mayor Adrian Fenty. More recently, the Smithsonian placed Ben's Chili Bowl on its list of the 20 Most Iconic Food Destinations Across America.

Dr. Monica M. White, Ph.D. is the Distinguished Chair of Integrated Environmental Studies (2021-25) and associate professor of Environmental Justice at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She holds a joint appointment in the Department of Community and Environmental Sociology and the Nelson Institute of Environmental Studies. She is the first Black woman to earn tenure in both the College of Agricultural Life Sciences (established 1889) and the Nelson Institute (established 1970). Dr. White is the author of *Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement*. Her research investigates Black, Latinx, and Indigenous grassroots organizations that are engaged in the development of sustainable, community-based food systems as a strategy to respond to issues of hunger and food inaccessibility in both contemporary times and the twentieth century.

Elliott Gaskins (Moderator)

As senior vice president of development at Share Our Strength, Elliott oversees a team across the country focused on securing major and foundation gifts, building the vision and leading a team that executes fundraising dinners for No Kid Hungry Dinner and other cultivation events, as well as building multi-year plans and strategies to significantly grow revenue.

For more than two decades Elliott has worked at some of the premier nonprofit institutions in the country including The Aspen Institute, The Alzheimer's Association, The Nature Conservancy, and America's Promise Alliance. During his tenure at these organizations he raised millions of dollars and executed multi-year campaigns, led national special events, created, designed and implemented comprehensive strategic plans and led critical work on diversity, equity and inclusion.