

FOOD APRIL 2008 ATLANTIC MONTHLY

A crime-plagued mill town in Massachusetts has discovered the roots of urban renewal.

BY CORBY KUMMER

## A Papaya Grows in Holyoke



MARK OSTOW

DANIEL ROSS AND ANGEL ORTIZ with two interested participants at the farm in Holyoke

"Tell him what happened with the sign," Daniel Ross said to Angel Ortiz at the gate to [Nuestras Raíces farm](#), 30 acres of vegetables, animals, and flowers on the banks of the Connecticut River in Holyoke, Massachusetts. Ortiz, a strapping but shy 18-year-old who helps tend the farm—"the pig whisperer," Ross calls him—looked down. "It was just a truck!" he said. Then he told the story: "I backed up and it broke on me." Ross, smiling, stretched out his hand to take Ortiz's in a long, solid grip. "Angel's going to be the next mayor of Holyoke," he said.

Young people run things at Nuestras Raíces ("Our Roots"), the nonprofit agency Ross heads. They're allowed to screw up and figure out how to fix their own problems. Many agencies around the country encourage similar activities: city gardening, youth training, healthful eating, entrepreneurship. But few have integrated themselves with equal reach and results, or helped rebuild as troubled a community as Holyoke.

Though it is in the bucolic Pioneer Valley, Holyoke, among the state's poorest cities, is notorious for its drug use and attendant crime. As in many picturesque New England river cities with impressive Romanesque Revival buildings, mills made it rich and then dealt it a decisive blow when labor costs shut them down. In Holyoke's case, the mills made paper, not textiles, and the blow came relatively late—after

a sizable Puerto Rican population had settled there in the 1960s and '70s, drawn by factory jobs and nearby tobacco farms. The farm jobs dried up about the same time the mills closed, and unemployment rates have remained high. But the knowledge and love of farming have stayed strong in the Puerto Rican community, which accounts for nearly 40 percent of the city's population.

Holyoke was thus fertile ground for “urban agriculture”—the successor to the still-flourishing community-garden movement, which itself grew out of World War II victory gardens. In the late 1960s, in the wake of urban renewal's wholesale razing, community gardens cleaned up blighted lots, curbed vandalism, and gave people who had never had one a say in how their neighborhoods were run. Today, according to the [American Community Gardening Association](#), there are more than 17,000 community gardens all over the country. The urban-agriculture movement looks for ways people can make money on what they grow (seldom a focus of community gardens) and puts an emphasis on training youth to strengthen their communities. And it gives people access to fresh vegetables in “food deserts” where the only oases are gas stations and convenience stores.

As you might expect in the “Five College” area, Nuestras Raíces was born with the help of a thesis—one on community gardens written by Seth Williams, an undergraduate at Hampshire College. Williams worked with several experienced gardeners and community leaders in South Holyoke to find land, water, and tools for a new community garden to replace one lost to development. To keep the garden and the alliances around it alive, community members founded Nuestras Raíces in 1992. One garden has grown to nine, and the annual budget is now more than \$800,000.

Much of the growth has been under Ross, who became executive director in 1995 at just 22, after a childhood steeped in activism and a year spent working with migrant farmworkers up and down the East Coast. Ross is a wiry man with big green eyes. He listens intently, and he is laconic. His group's ability to draw in local health centers, churches, and schools and give the reins to young people has made Nuestras Raíces a national model. “There's so much discourse around community voice,” says Linda Jo Doctor, program director for health at the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, in Battle Creek, Michigan, which took an early interest in Nuestras Raíces. “But it's real there.”

Last year, Kellogg invited Nuestras Raíces to apply to be part of a new long-term initiative called [“Food and Fitness.”](#) Working with the Holyoke Health Center, Ross helped assemble a coalition of about 75 groups that asked for a \$500,000 two-year planning grant. The coalition was one of just nine in the country to win one—a signal achievement for Nuestras Raíces and for Holyoke, which if the plans are approved stands to get as much as \$3.75 million.

Even in the middle of winter, when I visited, it was apparent how meticulously the gardens are maintained—unlike many other urban gardens I know, which out of season can resemble the trash heaps they started out as. Everything looked freshly groomed: the wooden fences separating individual 15-by-20-foot plots, the gaily painted *casitas*, tool sheds that are “artistic statements,” Ross told me, and gathering places like stoops. Several gardens had plastic-covered hoop houses, greenhouses that in the dead of winter can get pretty grungy. I didn't detect a rip.

“We have nine community gardens in some of the toughest neighborhoods in the city if not the country,” Ross said, “and the incidence of vandalism has been almost zero.” Joel Cortijo, a colleague along for the tour, said simply, “It's ours.” Cortijo, 30, grew up in Holyoke and spent six years in the Army before returning to run a high-school basketball league; he is now co-coordinator of Holyoke's Food and Fitness Policy Council, which will help decide how to spend money from the Kellogg grant. Harming a garden, he said, “would be like vandalizing your own car.”

Oran Hesterman, a former program director for Kellogg, told me that when he visited Nuestras Raíces, he was impressed by something Ross didn't do: “fall all over himself” to give him the grand tour. “He was busy,” he said. So Ross left him in the hands of two 15-year-old workers, proof that Nuestras Raíces “really trusts young people to give the straight story.”

Gardens are the heart of everything Nuestras Raíces does. Children can often be found playing in vegetable patches and in adjacent playgrounds built on land cleared of needles, broken glass, and brush that gave dealers a place to hide their drugs. Grandfathers and fathers, many of whom grew up on farms in Puerto Rico, teach schoolchildren how to grow peppers and eggplants and experiment in greenhouses on the farm with exotics like papayas and avocados, to see what they can get to grow in the New England climate. “During the summer you’ll find a dozen guys sitting on tables and benches,” Ross said, “shelling beans and telling lies about the size of their tomatoes.”

Whole families help with the preparation of a winter’s supply of *sofrito*, the condiment made with onion, garlic, cilantro, green peppers, and *ajices dulces* (sweet cooking peppers) that forms the base for many Puerto Rican dishes. Janet Crespo Santana makes it to sell out of a test kitchen at Nuestras Raíces’s downtown headquarters. The kitchen, approved for commercial use, is the home of El Jardín, a successful artisan bakery that makes an impressively crusty sourdough loaf in a wood-fired brick oven (it supplies local restaurants, and recently opened its own café in tony South Deerfield).

Practically everyone in town comes for lunch at Mi Plaza, a restaurant in the same building that uses Nuestras Raíces herbs and vegetables in the summer and makes traditional Puerto Rican food all year—some of it healthful (stewed chicken over plantains mashed with garlic, rice with fresh herbs and calabaza squash), some of it less so (Ross’s favorite, *alcapurria*, fritters of chile-spiked beef *picadillo* in a dough of grated taro root and green bananas).

Nutritionists in the sunny teaching kitchen of the health center, which is housed in a splendidly renovated furniture store downtown, show patients how to reduce the fat in traditional Puerto Rican dishes (Holyoke has the state’s highest diabetes rate), using fresh fruit and vegetables from the supermarket out of season and from a student-run Nuestras Raíces stand at a weekly farmers’ market in front of City Hall. “It goes way beyond food,” Ross said, “but it starts with food.”

The farm, a mile from downtown Holyoke, was Nuestras Raíces’s response to requests from community gardeners for larger plots that they could work commercially. It has turned into an attraction of its own, with a petting zoo, a farm stand, summer concerts, and weekly pig roasts—a look, and a life, as close as people in the Puerto Rican community can come to the villages they and their families remember. A massive effort to till the overgrown land—the original four acres grew to 30 when the Sisters of Providence next door offered 26 prime acres for a nominal rent—brought together students, church groups, and pre-release prisoners to chop out invasive species, haul and spread tons of compost, and clear nature trails along the river. In a moment of what he now calls mad ambition, Ross decided to move an enormous red gabled barn from a site a few miles away. It was roofless when I saw it, but the plan is to house *paso finos*, “fine-stepping” horses that are a source of Puerto Rican pride.

Farmers go through an eight-week training program during which they write a business plan that serves as their application for a plot; so far, 20 of 45 applicants have been given plots at a monthly rent of \$25 a quarter-acre, and microloans to start “incubator farms.” Teenage farmers don’t pay rent.

When not pig whispering, Angel Ortiz grows vegetables to sell at farm stands on the plot he rents with his friend Bob Chipman, which they call Angel and Bob’s Farm. He hopes to sell salad greens and tomatoes and even kale to his high school, Dean Technical, right down the road, “where we never have fresh vegetables, ever.”

Ortiz knows how to cook the vegetables he grows (he told me how he fries eggplant): his father is a professional cook, and “half my friends,” he says, are studying to be chefs at Dean Technical. “Some people think gardening is for girls only,” he told me, “and you should get a real job, like working at a factory.” But “seeing someone popular do it makes it easier.”

So does seeing men grow vegetables during the day and use the gardens as social clubs at night. On summer weekends, there are music festivals on a bandstand built from foraged wood. The pig roasts, tended by men, are so popular that the farm will spin off a *lechonera*, the name for restaurants and roadside stands all over Puerto Rico that sell spit-roasted pig and traditional side dishes.

Similar groups are growing (you can find programs that focus on youth and agriculture at [www.thefoodproject.org/youthorgs](http://www.thefoodproject.org/youthorgs)). The People's Grocery runs five city gardens in and around Oakland, California, and is planning a new 15-acre farm and park, with the aim of creating jobs for young people; in Boston, the Food Project has long been a national leader in teaching city high-school students how to farm, inviting students from around the city to its summer programs; in Brooklyn, Added Value is starting a 2.75-acre "urban farm" on a former playground in Red Hook, a primarily African American community, and has already launched a successful farmers' market staffed by students.

But Nuestras Raíces stands out. The key, I was told by foundation managers and city officials, is active leaders who let the people the program is intended for set its agenda instead of the usual, as Linda Jo Doctor put it, "grown-ups deciding what young people need."

"Food projects," Ross told me, as he and Ortiz walked me back to the farm gate long after dark, "are an extremely powerful way to get at what's healthy about a community."

"During the summer you'll find a dozen guys sitting on tables and benches," Ross said, "shelling beans and telling lies about the size of their tomatoes."