

STATES OF FARMING

# The African Alliance of Rhode Island brings pop-up markets to underserved communities

By **Jocelyn Ruggiero** Globe correspondent, Updated August 3, 2021, 10:00 a.m.



Garmi Mawolo at her fresh vegetable stand outside Urban Greens in Providence. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

*Another in a series of occasional stories looking at BIPOC farmers in New England.*

PROVIDENCE — It's a sticky 91 degrees on a late Friday afternoon in July, and although the chalk-decorated A-frame sign announces "Pop-Up Market," the sidewalk outside the

[Urban Greens Food Co-Op](#) in the West End feels more like a block party. A DJ moves in rhythm as he blasts Michael Jackson’s “Wanna Be Startin’ Somethin.” Pedestrians pause as women in colorful African fabrics lift produce from vehicles parked curbside and pile it high in orderly rows of wicker baskets on three long plastic folding tables covered in floral vinyl tablecloths, under which hangs a banner that reads “AARI Bami Farm,” the [African Alliance of Rhode Island](#). The eldest of the women, 63-year-old Garimi Mawolo, wears a blue and yellow head wrap. She settles into a plastic folding chair and waits for customers.

AARI director and co-founder Julius Kolawole is everywhere: helping the farmers set up, handing out AARI fliers, checking an adjacent [Farm Fresh Rhode Island](#) table where employees offer postcards (in Spanish and English) explaining how shoppers can double their SNAP dollars at the farm market, and farther up the street, talking to [Urban Ventures](#) executive director Ron Crosson, who was instrumental in developing and launching AARI’s pop-up markets in 2017. Urban Ventures’ bilingual materials invite potential entrepreneurs: “Have an idea? Launch it with UV.” Around the corner, two women at a hot grill give out samples of a dish made using sweet potato greens grown at Bami Farm, and nearby, there is a COVID-19 vaccination station. The event is a synthesis of Kolawole’s work supporting Providence’s African immigrants and underserved communities.

Kolawole grew up far from the West End of Providence on his family’s farm in a small Nigerian town, where they grew cocoa, kola nut, cassava, plantain, bananas, yam, and corn. He followed a path many Nigerians do, coming to the United States to pursue higher education, later returning to Nigeria to teach. He ultimately returned to the United States, accepting a job in 1987 as an electrical engineer, settling in Providence, where he observed the city’s widespread African immigrant population. It is a diaspora that has continued to grow to this day. Nationally, immigrants from Africa make up 4.2 percent of the foreign-born population, but they make up more than 12 percent in Rhode Island. Thirty-one of Africa’s 54 nations are represented in the state.

Kolawole saw opportunities to support the immigrants he encountered: “You just pay attention to the community you live in, and you’ll begin to ask yourself, of what use are you to this community?” When he founded the African Alliance of Rhode Island in 2004, he established four core areas of programming: food, art, culture, and health.

Repeatedly, Kolawole observed African women who spent their evenings isolated in their apartments. Women like Garimi Mawolo, whom Kolawole met at church. When Mawolo fled to Ghana to escape the violence of civil war in Liberia, her family was separated. Some of her children and her husband remained in Liberia. Others in her family died or went missing. Mawolo remained in Ghana until her son helped her immigrate to Rhode Island as a refugee in 2006. Cooped up in her small apartment on the western edge of Providence, suffering from diabetes and high blood pressure, Mawolo grew impatient, eager for activity. She, like Kolawole, was raised on a farm, so she sought out a way to get her hands in the dirt again. She began with a small plot in the city with the Southside Community Land Trust. But the significant shift came when Kolawole approached her with an invitation to join him on a new AARI venture: a community garden.





Julius Kolawole, director and co-founder of the African Alliance of Rhode Island. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

Kolawole's motives for creating a garden were twofold: "Almost all of us grew up in a small town or in a small village; therefore, growing agriculture is part of our daily routine." And, a garden would replicate something else absent from the lives of the immigrants in their new American lives: "Africans — most, not all of us — were village people. I could come to your door and ask for half an onion. . . . Everybody knows the grandmother, the granddad, and you don't misbehave . . . they don't ask, 'What's your name? [They ask], 'What's your father's name?' That's how we all grew up."

And so, one Saturday in 2009, Kolawole and a group of African refugee women and their families, including Mawolo, arrived at an abandoned lot in the West End offered to AARI by the West Elmwood housing agency. They spent a couple of hours cleaning up and building a raised bed. They added soil and, when the work was done, ordered a pizza for lunch. Kolawole describes what happened next: "At about 2 p.m., the pizza came and the women started to dance. They began to sing and they began to dance. And I thought, 'My job has been done.' When you are able to put a smile on anybody's face, that's hope. I was very happy that afternoon. So, that was our beginning." The community garden became a haven for the women in the evenings, where they would gather and, as they worked in the garden, talk and tell stories. Sometimes, they'd bring their children. Mawolo smiles a little when she talks about being able to garden in the evenings after years of only spending time in her apartment: "I had other ladies to talk to and African people there, too."

The AARI community garden program allowed its farmers to grow the traditional African vegetables they couldn't find in American stores. Vegetables like the garden egg, sweet potato greens, water greens, ewedu, efin (African basil), amaranth, callaloo, sokoyokoto, worowo, and cassava leaf. Kolawole said, "It was powerful. It worked. And it's a good thing to feed your family." And something more, he says: "Food is a control mechanism. As long as you let me tell you what you can eat, when you can eat it, you're under my thumb. Free yourself, grow your own food, know where the food comes from."



Garmi Mawolo at her fresh vegetable stand outside Urban Greens in Providence. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

In 2012, Kolawole took Mawolo and one of the other women from the community garden to sell what they grew at the Armory Farmers Market in Providence's West End; its mission is to bring fresh, locally grown vegetables to underserved communities. The experience was, he says, "extraordinary." Despite the language barriers and the fact that most Americans weren't familiar with the African vegetables, they sold out within 90 minutes. They also discovered that there were many Latinos, former Peace Corps members, and people from the Caribbean who were familiar with their African vegetables. They built on that success in 2014 by selling at Sims Farm Fresh Winter Market (located then in Pawtucket), adding cooking demonstrations to help familiarize

their majority caucasian audience with the produce, and selling value-added products like jam and relish made from vegetables grown at Bami Farm. For Kolawole, the interactions with customers were the greatest reward: “The human part of it is always attractive to me. They began to make friends. Americans are curious. They want to ask you questions.” Mawolo recalls the experience proudly: “They ask me, and I explain everything. . . . It feels good to me.”



Francy Hinds (left) and her mother, Frances, serve curry chick peas with sautéed sweet potato tops over rice during a cooking demonstration sponsored by The African Alliance of Rhode Island. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

In 2018, needing more land to meet the growing demand for vegetables, AARI leased 6 acres to the west of Providence in Johnston. Bami Farm (Bami means “mine” in Swahili and Zulu) is now home to 14 farmers. Some, like Mawolo, are refugees from Liberia; others are from Congo, Burundi, and Rwanda. Kolawole grows there as well. Every day during harvest season, the women work in these fields tilling, weeding, planting, watering, and harvesting. With more space and increased production at Bami came the

...ing, and ...ing. ... more space and increased production at the same time the opportunity for more sales.

When Kolawole first conceived of pop-up markets, his goal was to reach communities, mainly in West and South Providence, where access to fresh produce is limited. He rejects the terminology “food desert” and instead refers to these neighborhoods as “untapped markets.” He invited Ron Crosson to join him, the farmers, and community representatives as they developed these plans. As Urban Ventures’ executive director, Crosson has the expertise of helping small businesses develop, grow, and achieve profitability. He was also born and raised in South Providence. Crosson explains, “In the communities we’re working within, farmers’ markets are very a foreign concept, or, a concept that many people feel is not for them. . . . But if you look at the cultures from which people come, whether it’s the Dominican Republic, or Africa, or Southeast Asia, when you go to those countries, you will see farmers’ markets all over the place. So what the pop-up is trying to do is bring the concept of a farmers’ market even closer to the individual community so that they can experience it. And really, it almost becomes . . . a leaping board where people can come in and get their feet wet and get comfortable with the concept.” AARI schedules the pop-up markets at the beginning of each month since that is when the community they are trying to reach receives SNAP benefits.



Ron Crosson, executive director at Urban Ventures, samples a vegetarian chick pea curry made with sautéed sweet potato tops during a cooking demonstration. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

AARI's pop-up locations will continue to expand in the coming year. And under Kolawole's stewardship, Bami Farm thrives and its infrastructure grows. He's currently test planting in their new high tunnel and greenhouse so the farmers can extend their growing season through late fall and winter, and they're making plans to eventually deliver vegetables directly to consumers. In addition to other food-centered initiatives, Kolawole oversees seven AARI community gardens throughout the city, including two at Section 8 public housing properties. Always, Kolawole has a persistent optimism about the power of food to build community and connection, to bridge divides between cultures: "Maybe we can get to know each other. Africans love plantain. Latinos love platano. It's the same thing. They call it platano, we call it plantain. So, at our pop-up

market, we always have peeling plantain contests. It's hilarious. . . . You don't have to come and buy anything, but you can come to watch the performance. Maybe on the way out, you may say hello to somebody. And you never know, an onion may end up in your bag.”

For more information about the African Alliance of Rhode Island and for a schedule of their 2021 pop-up markets, visit [africanallianceri.org](http://africanallianceri.org). For more information about Urban Ventures, visit [www.urbanventuresri.org](http://www.urbanventuresri.org).

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