



Land Ethic Mentorship

For Historically Underserved Farmers & Ranchers

MEET THE MENTEES

Carmen McKee, Gary, Indiana



Carmen McKee



'If you want to learn, then go and ask the wild animals and the birds, the flowers and the fish. Any of them can tell you what the Lord has done. Every living creature is in the hands of God.'

(Job 12:7-10 CEV)

I aim to imitate the originals and make this land better. My mission is to replenish soil and people. Why soil first? We came from dust, to dust we shall return. The soil feeds us. That is what community is to me.



Carmen McKee is the farmer behind City Cultivators and Oases Botanic Garden. She grows intensively on an acre of urban land, with a commercial focus on garlic production. Oases Botanic Garden is open to the local community, and Carmen uses the space to engage her neighbors, teach, and learn about soil health and regenerative farming practices.



Her Story

Carmen moved to Gary in 2016, and worked as a chaplain at a local hospital where patients often discussed their concerns around accessing food for themselves and their families. It was here that Carmen first learned the term "food desert," an area with limited or no access to fresh fruits and vegetables. She decided to take action and spent the next three summers interning at different farms, working in the soil by day, and going to her job at the hospital at night.

In 2019, Carmen received permission to lease a portion of a six-acre lot that was formerly an army reserve medic facility. After talking with neighbors surrounding the property, she started Oases Botanic Garden, a community space designed to welcome and teach. She began with herbs and edible flowers that added flavor and nutrition to food. Eventually, Carmen started growing garlic as a pest deterrent, and as a way to enhance the flavor of fruit. The garlic tasted so good, and got such good reviews, that she decided to grow it commercially, creating City Cultivators as the business side of her farm.

She found that local chefs had low expectations of garlic and were used to the singular varieties they could find at the store. Carmen had them taste the garlic from her farm...and her commercial market was born. She is currently growing Penasco Blue, Chesnok Red, Music, and Elephant varieties. City Cultivators also custom farms chili peppers on a separate property for a local restaurant. In addition to extensive pollinator plantings and cover crops, Carmen makes on-site compost and practices crop rotation.



CARMEN'S ADVICE FOR NEW FARMERS:

Build community—not just farmers—beyond family, beyond coworkers. It's more than just joining a group. It takes work. Building a community means sharing resources, checking in on their families and how they are doing. Be intentional, build a network.



Her Mentor

Michael Thompson is the 2022 Kansas Leopold Conservation Award recipient. A deeply curious person with a passion for soil health, Michael has spent countless hours in conversation with Carmen— she loves his way of saying, “I suggest” when he has an idea for her. His approach, likely informed by his years as a teacher, makes it easy to take his advice, as it seems as though he is on a learning journey with her. “I told him that I want to scale up, and he has helped me think about what that really means to me, and to use my vocabulary accordingly,” says Carmen. “He suggested I take *urban* and *small* out of my vocabulary. ‘You are a **farmer**.’” Now Carmen is planning to expand her farm to grow purple sweet potatoes and sweet peas to support a local program that provides fresh fruits and vegetables to pregnant women and mothers with babies. Michael is supporting Carmen’s vision by introducing her to other

farmers, connecting her with resources that he has found useful, and helping her clearly define her farming goals.

Lessons Learned

Carmen has built a deep network of resources and credits her success to the partnerships she’s established. Those partnerships didn’t happen by accident, though. “I have all these resources because I spent years volunteering and learning.” She successfully barter for materials and believes that her focus on building relationships is key to her thriving farm. “Please consider the bigger picture—we need one another, especially given the world we live in.”

What is Next?

Carmen is working to expand her business by farming more acres and eventually retrofitting the buildings on the property so they can house volunteers, farm workers, students, and visitors. She is also completing a two-year training that will allow her to become a consultant for the City of Gary and help develop a municipal composting program. Right now, there is only one trained consultant in the state of Indiana, so Carmen hopes City Cultivators can become a training resource for others interested in municipal composting.

Enroll Now!

Learn more and sign up for this free mentorship opportunity at: sandcountyfoundation.org/mentorship or contact Nikki D’Adamo-Damery at: nikki@sandcountyfoundation.org



Natural Resources Conservation Service

The Land Ethic Mentorship program serves historically underserved (socially disadvantaged, beginning, limited resource, and veteran) farmers and ranchers with resources to support their conservation and production goals. Sand County Foundation’s network of Leopold Conservation Award-winning farmers and ranchers, who have been recognized for extraordinary conservation achievement, serve as program mentors. Mentors support their mentees as they develop their conservation and agricultural practices to balance farm productivity, ecosystem health, and community wellbeing.



Sand County Foundation inspires and empowers a growing number of land owners and managers to ethically care for the land to sustain water resources, build healthy soil, enhance wildlife habitat, and support outdoor recreation.

www.sandcountyfoundation.org