

FOOD FROM THE HOOD

Told by Jeffrey Madison

When the 1992 Los Angeles riots broke out, fifteen-year-old Karla Becerra was on the bus heading home from school. She could smell the smoke and see the fires. As she looked out her window, she saw people running down the street, wheeling strollers packed with things stolen from vandalized stores. But it wasn't until a week later, when she finally got the courage to leave her house, that Karla saw the true extent of the damage.

Everywhere she looked, everything was burned to the ground. The national guard patrolled the streets. To Karla, it no longer looked like the Los Angeles she knew, but like her native El Salvador. The city and its people were lost. "Everyone at our high school was talking about what needed to be done," she remembers. "But we all felt there was nothing we could do. We were afraid even to go outside."

Karla's biology teacher, Tammy Bird, was deeply upset about her Crenshaw High School students and how they had suffered during the riots. She wanted to empower Karla and the others, and to help them regain their sense of community. Before the riots, they had peacefully crossed racial and ethnic boundaries. She wanted to let her students know they could do so again.

She had an idea. Directly behind their classroom was a cluttered, weed-infested lot. Tammy invited her students to clear this quarter-acre plot of land and plant a community garden. The students pulled weeds

one by one, making room for the new life to come. They planted herbs and tomatoes. Next came cabbage, lettuce, and carrots. “When we first started, I knew nothing about gardens or plants,” says Karla. But she learned quickly enough to be put in charge of the watering, weeding, and harvesting operations.

The once-vacant lot soon blossomed with colorful and delicious vegetables. The student gardeners had transformed a wasteland into a wonderland, and they all thought it was wonderful indeed to see their damaged community coming back to life. Ms. Bird and her adventurous crew next formed a company, claiming a vacant classroom as an office. The students would own and operate the business; they named it Food from the 'Hood. Ms. Bird invited Melinda McMullen, a public relations expert, to teach the students how to launch and promote it.

The students were all very proud when they shared 25 percent of their first harvest with the homeless at Crenshaw’s community outreach centers. “We all fell in love with the garden because we were growing happiness there,” Karla recalls. “Knowing that people in our community were fed by our food, and that Thanksgiving or Christmas dinners would be extra special for our neighbors, made me grateful to be a part of this.”

They sold the rest of the crop at local farmers’ markets. The student-owners were happy to provide fresh vegetables to the community and make money in the process! As the business thrived, they took it one step further, investing the profits in their own future, in the form of college scholarships for graduating seniors in their school.

The proceeds would support a few scholarships, but they wanted to create something that might help all of them pay for college. Looking at

the wide variety of vegetables they had growing outside, they listed all the ingredients for a salad—the only thing missing was the dressing. So the students made up their own, “Straight Out of the Garden Creamy Italian Salad Dressing,” and sold it.

The student-owners had to learn a lot about accounting, as well as making, marketing, and distributing a new product. They had to learn the distinct language of business in order to meet with grocery executives to talk about their salad dressing. “In the beginning, I was very shy—a little girl stuck in the corner with nothing to say,” says Karla. “The first time I had to give a presentation, I cried. I didn’t want to face those businesspeople.” But over time, with the support of her fellow students, Karla found the confidence to speak with ease and let her conviction come through.

In November 1994, Prince Charles of England accepted an invitation to visit the Food from the ’Hood garden. The students voted to select one student to give the prince the tour of the garden. They chose Karla. The girl who was once too shy to speak out in the classroom braved a crowd of more than two hundred reporters armed with cameras and microphones in order to escort the prince.

“Karla was never one of those kids in danger of being involved with crime; what she was in danger of was never realizing her potential,” says Tammy. “Food from the ’Hood changed all that. Just as our garden blossomed, so did she, into a confident, supportive, and outgoing person.”

“We had a goal of doing something that would help everyone—all races— come together,” Karla says. “And we did it. We showed the

world that with hard work and a dream, anything is possible.”

Today, Food from the 'Hood's salad dressings are sold in more than two thousand grocery and whole-food stores nationwide. The students' business has grown just as their vegetables did. Thanks to the scholarship fund, graduating seniors go straight out of high school into college. It all began with a few seeds in a vacant lot—and a teacher's desire to bring out the best in her students.

You can buy **Food from the 'Hood** salad dressings (Creamy Italian, Honey Mustard, Ranch, and 2,000 Island) and help graduating Crenshaw High seniors go straight into college. Ask your grocery store to join the more than two thousand grocery and whole-food stores nationwide that carry it. To learn more, visit www.foodfromthehood.com.