

Reconnecting Durham's roots

By John Hamlin
UNC Staff Writer
The Durham Voice

Kifu Faruq and Melanie Wilkerson aren't just food lovers — they're food justice warriors.

The two organized Green Space Initiative (GSI) in 2010 to empower the people of Northeast Central Durham to eat healthy and affordable food by reconnecting to their roots in community gardening.

Executive Director Wilkerson remembers times when community gardening was common in Durham. "On my particular street, which was Plum Street, I believe we had five gardens on the street and everyone would share their food," Wilkerson said. "It was a community thing but more than, considering what people say community is now, it was an actual way of life."

"There was never a second thought that you take care of your neighbor," she said.

The shift away from community gardening came in the 1980s, Wilkerson said, when upwardly mobile Durhamites left the city and flocked to larger homes in the suburbs.

"It kind of became a ghost town in terms of the downtown area, living closer to the universities," Wilkerson said. "No one really wanted to do that because they bought into what they thought the American dream was."

In the process of the migration, multinational agriculture corporations cornered the market for nutritional food, Director of Programming and Marketing Faruq said. And now, people have forgotten the once common skills of raising, cooking and canning food.

"Anybody could get seeds and put them in the dirt and grow food with any amount of money, and they knew how to," Faruq said. "Fifty years later, we're so removed from that that in order to have access, you now have to have money."

Along with the financial limitations for obtaining nutritional food, Faruq said Northeast Central Durham is what researchers call a food desert because residents don't have access to nutritional food sellers. Other than TROSA Grocery and Los Primos Supermarket, the food most accessible for Northeast Central Durham residents is limited to junk food like chips and sodas from convenience stores.



Staff photo by John Hamlin
Kifu Faruq and Melanie Wilkerson inspect their herb bed at the Holton Career and Resource Center.

Access, however, is more than a matter of availability and price, said Faruq. It's also a matter of consciousness and state of mind. GSI is unusual, she said, because it recognizes the less obvious factors that keep people from healthy eating.

"Another thing is people's belief that organic food and local food are for a certain segment of the population and not for them. 'That's for people with money, that's for white people,'" Faruq said.

Everyone has a right to fresh, organic food because corporations do not genetically modify food with the consumer in mind, said Faruq, who also works as a lead clinical research associate at RTI Health Solutions. "If it ain't broke, why are you messing with it?" she said. "I don't need fish genes spliced in with my tomatoes."

"They'll tell you it's not their responsibility to make sure their food is safe — that it's the U.S. Department of Agriculture's responsibility," she said.

"Really, it's not the USDA's job, it's not the Food and Drug Administration's job, it's not Monsanto's job," Faruq said. "It's our job to make sure our food is safe. And the only way to ensure that is to grow it yourself or to know your farmer."

Faruq and Wilkerson are partners in life as well as business. After a friend introduced them in July 2000, the two fell in love and married in January 2011.

Faruq and Wilkerson clicked in part because of their shared passion for food and their desire to leave a positive legacy for future generations. In 2009, their kitchen table conversations turned into mission statements and action, Faruq said, and GSI was born. The company officially organized June 17, 2010, according to state records.

Speaking engagements and workshops provide the company's primary source of revenue, Faruq said. Their steadiest work comes from the Durham Department of Parks and Recreation, but they have also worked for local universities, organizations and private parties.

Keith Shaljian, co-operator of Bountiful Backyards, worked with GSI on Two Ton Farm, a minifarm project, in the summer of 2010. He said that though the company is young, Faruq and Wilkerson are ambitious.

"They're just in the startup phase," Shaljian said. "Be looking for bigger things from them down the line."