

# BANANA KELLY COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATION

HUNTS POINT/LONGWOOD, SOUTH BRONX

## ABOUT BANANA KELLY COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATION

Since its inception in 1977, the Banana Kelly Community Improvement Association has worked to sustain and expand low income housing in the Hunts Point/Longwood neighborhood. Banana Kelly's mission is to contribute to a revitalized, safe, and economically vibrant South Bronx. The organization has sponsored the redevelopment of over 2,240 units of affordable housing and provides direct services to approximately 5,000 residents. It also provides support services to the community at large, where 55% of inhabitants receive some form of public assistance, 49% of families live beneath the federal poverty line, and the unemployment rate (24%) is the city's highest.



**Wanda Swinney, a resident of 331 East 146th Street, Banana Kelly Resident Council Leader, and shop steward union member of DC37 Local 429, has a vision for her community: “I want things to be beautiful. I want there to be a space for people to come together. Most importantly, I want to help create change.”**

So she reached out to an organizer with Banana Kelly for support to achieve her goals. After Banana Kelly was awarded a grant through Rebuilding Together NYC, Wanda worked with her neighbors and local organizations to completely transform a vacant Banana Kelly owned lot into a community garden and open space for residents to come together. Residents are not only using the garden to grow and share their own produce, they are also using the space as a meeting spot for their neighborhood association to improve the quality of life for residents in their building.



The garden is part of a comprehensive place-based strategy to address resident health and economic development through food called Communities for Healthy Food NYC (CfHF). Launched at Banana Kelly in 2016 with technical assistance and funding through LISC NYC and Laurie M. Tisch Illumination Fund, this initiative integrates access to healthy and affordable food into every aspect of community development work—providing resident outreach, nutrition education, and cooking classes, and creating new or improved healthy food outlets. Cornerstones of the CfHF program are community food advocates, who serve as “boots on the ground” in each target neighborhood to lead planning, program management, stakeholder development, and advocacy efforts.

## WHY COMMUNITIES FOR HEALTHY FOOD?

Banana Kelly's participation in the CfHF program was born out of a project that began in 2012 when LISC NYC engaged Banana Kelly in a HUD Choice Neighborhoods Initiative planning process for public housing development of Betances Houses. One of the community concerns during the planning process was a lack of affordable, healthy food options in the area around the public housing development.

According to Anna Burnham, former Banana Kelly staff member, the CfHF initiative was also a natural extension of successful programming and food production at 924 Kelly Street Community Garden. In 2013, Banana Kelly staff partnered with residents to plan the garden and grow their own vegetables, herbs, and flowers in a sustainable and pesticide-free environment. While the Kelly Street garden launched as a social justice project to address limited access to healthy food options in the South Bronx. It has become a community hub, hosting community forums, resident to resident dialogues, research projects, and cooking demos and workshops. Through the collaborative effort, the Banana Kelly team recognized that expanded urban farming in the community had the power to increase access to nutritious food, improve resident health, and, even more importantly, help rebuild the strong sense of community lost in a neighborhood that has suffered from neglect and violence.

The CfHF initiative was a natural extension of successful programming and food production at 924 Kelly Street Community Garden.

# PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

Banana Kelly's efforts are focused on creating new and improved healthy food outlets and venues for residents. Gardens are a rich resource in Banana Kelly's catchment area and form a cornerstone of the community's healthy food work.



ADVOCACY AND  
COMMUNITY  
BUILDING



HEALTHY  
FOOD ACCESS



URBAN FARMING  
AND  
GARDENING



CULINARY AND  
NUTRITION KNOWLEDGE  
SHARING



GOOD FOOD  
JOBS



SCHOOL  
PROGRAMS



## URBAN FARMING AND GARDENING

The community operates four gardens as community action hubs. Each garden is supported by a block association.

Starting in 2013, residents transformed the open space at Kelly Street Houses into an active hub for growing fresh produce

and rebuilding a sense of community. The newest garden, College Avenue Garden of Hope, was built in 2016 with assistance from Rebuilding Together, LISC staff and local volunteer groups. The blighted backyard was remodeled with raised vegetable beds and benches to create an inviting space for events and dialogues on pressing issues like tackling neighborhood drug use.

Staff Garden Coordinators help resident leaders establish the gardens and provide community outreach support. Banana Kelly also provides gardening and advocacy training to resident leaders who are required to spend 10 hours per week stewarding gardens.

**“You can build whatever you want. You can build a house or a garden or another structure, but unless people are invested in it, every day, working on it and making it grow and maintaining it, eventually it’s just going to turn to rubble.”**

—Harry DeRienzo, *President of Banana Kelly.*



## GOOD FOOD JOBS

The program supports 20 summer youth Garden Ambassadors. This enables Banana Kelly to provide more workshops at the gardens while employing community youth.

The organization was also able to create a stipend program for Kelly Street garden members who are part of the Health Initiative Committee. The Committee helps plan cooking workshops and other health programming. The committee members have been hosting an annual Block Party that showcases Banana Kelly's healthy food initiatives.

## ADVOCACY AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

There has been strong integration of arts, urban farming, and advocacy. In partnership with Workforce Housing Group, Kelly Street Garden, and Banana Kelly, the Laundromat Project transformed a 2-bedroom apartment into a creative community hub with artist studios and arts programming. The Collaborative grew out of Grow Love, a festival celebrating the bounty of the community garden, centered around the question, "What would you like to grow in your neighborhood?" To meet community needs, residents are leading research on the connections between housing affordability, food security and displacement. Volunteers conducted anti-displacement surveys to support community conversations.

## CULINARY AND NUTRITION KNOWLEDGE SHARING

During the growing season, bi-weekly cooking classes are taught in the gardens. The classes introduce residents to less familiar vegetables such as kohlrabi, kale, bok choy, and purple basil. They also cover how to make residents' favorite recipes more nutritious. The garden leadership team hosts annual events. The main event, Friends Giving, is held a week before Thanksgiving to celebrate the season with the community.

## HEALTHY FOOD ACCESS

New York Common Pantry is up and running at one of Banana Kelly's buildings. Residents are able to pair up pantry food with gardened food to save money. The pantry is a client choice model to provide a supermarket-like experience to residents in the Longwood neighborhood.

Banana Kelly also worked with 15 students in 2017 to run a free farmers market at College Avenue of Hope Garden. Young people planted, tended

and harvested food and distributed it door-to-door among residents of an affordable housing building adjacent to the garden.

Banana Kelly has also begun engaging bodega owners in NYC Department of Health's Shop Healthy program. The staff plans to use NYC DOHMH's "Adopt a Shop" model, where neighborhood residents collaborate with retailers to improve the healthy offerings in bodegas.



"People want to have a say in what they are eating. They don't want to have that dictated to them."  
— SAJATA EPPS

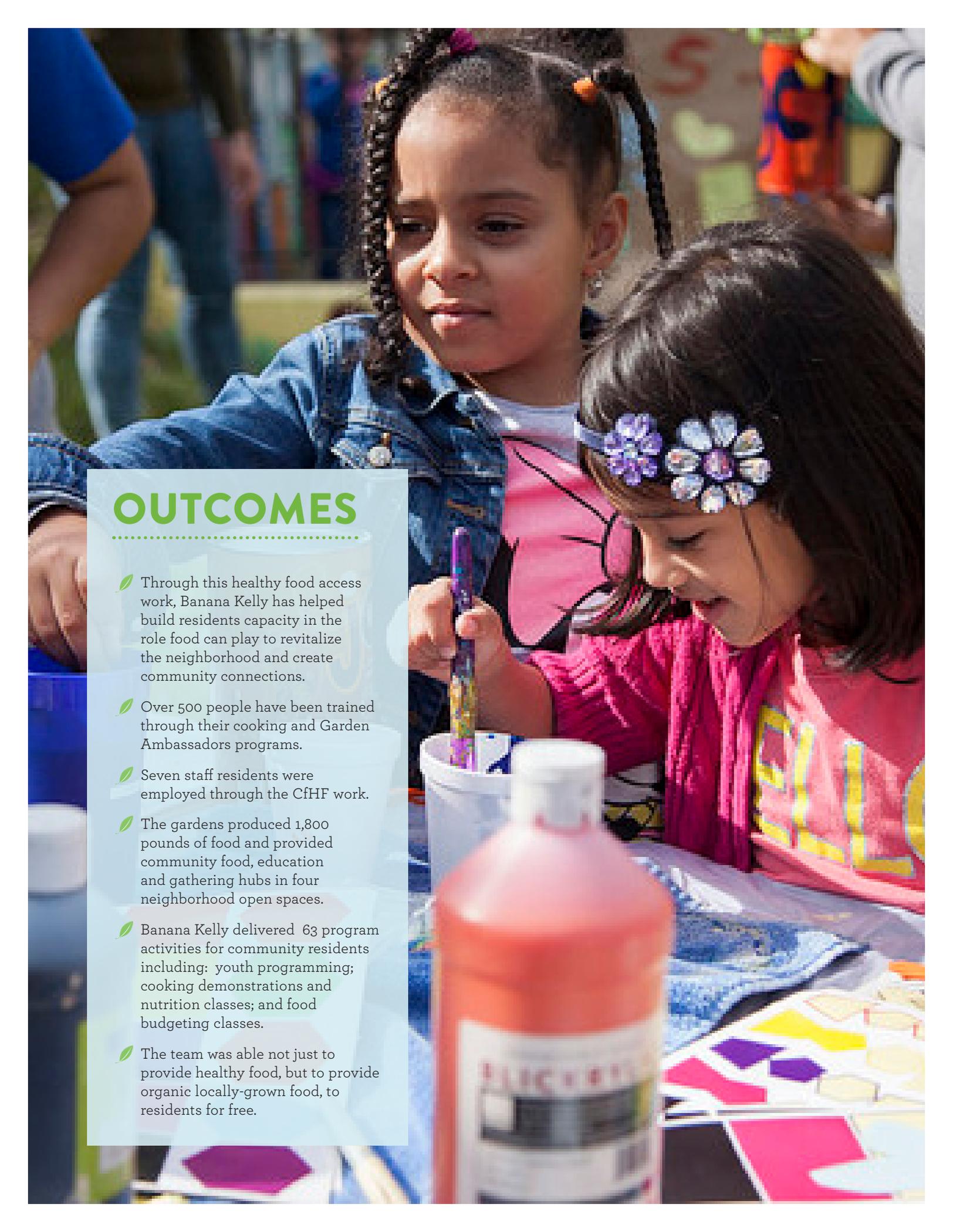
*Sajata Epps, a founding member of the Kelly Street Garden and the Kelly Street Collective*

## SCHOOL PROGRAMS

At Banana Kelly High School, buildOn has piloted an innovative program that integrates service learning curriculum into classrooms. buildOn is a not-for-profit that engages youth in service learning programs. A Food Justice Leadership Group was formed with students at the high school and other nearby schools. Two high school student interns led a group of their peers through a three-day intensive workshop to learn about community-based

injustices related to healthy food access and develop skills to reduce inequalities.

The youth from the Leadership Group engaged in research tours to examine the neighborhood food landscape and analyze food inequities. Participants volunteered at a food distribution center in Hunts Point, organized a neighborhood tour, and developed presentations and action plans to identify problems and brainstorm solutions.



## OUTCOMES

- Through this healthy food access work, Banana Kelly has helped build residents capacity in the role food can play to revitalize the neighborhood and create community connections.
- Over 500 people have been trained through their cooking and Garden Ambassadors programs.
- Seven staff residents were employed through the CfHF work.
- The gardens produced 1,800 pounds of food and provided community food, education and gathering hubs in four neighborhood open spaces.
- Banana Kelly delivered 63 program activities for community residents including: youth programming; cooking demonstrations and nutrition classes; and food budgeting classes.
- The team was able not just to provide healthy food, but to provide organic locally-grown food, to residents for free.

# FUNDING

LISC is the primary funder of Banana Kelly's healthy food work. During 2017, Banana Kelly was also able to secure \$5000 through ioby matching funds to hire five garden coordinators. Also, the partner volunteer program with retailer Barneys New York brings volunteers to assist with spring garden preparation and a financial donation. Banana Kelly has a similar volunteer program with Morgan Stanley which brings 20-30 volunteers to a site for a work day along with a financial donation. The team is seeking to grow the budget by capturing more public grant funds such as NYC City Council discretionary funding and federal USDA funds.



# LOOKING FORWARD



Banana Kelly will build on advocacy work. Along with advocating for a healthier community, the team wants to see hubs used to help protect affordability of housing and food in the community.

An ongoing goal is to increase the number of residents actively involved in the community garden sites.



The team plans to develop a career pipeline for residents who are developing leadership, farming, and culinary skills, so those committed to increasing access to healthy food can also gain paid employment.



The team plans to provide more free training programs for residents, such as health education including certification courses on diabetes. The goal is to deliver more "train the trainer" programs that can exponentially increase the capacity in the community to improve resident health.

# BEST PRACTICES/ADVICE

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🌿 Outreach during the planning process was critical. The community brought the interest in gardening and healthy food to the table. The Banana Kelly team needed to harness this. Staff and volunteers went door to door to reach as many residents as possible.

🌿 Build a strong core team and a supportive environment. Provide that team with resources, especially the things they need to help them engage residents. That could be compelling information or tools to better understand residents' needs and interests.

🌿 Getting people to come back is the challenge. Give people reasons to keep coming back by using the gardens (or other healthy food hubs) to address the issues people really care about and to provide them with key leadership and practical skills.

