

Stonehill

ALUMNI MAGAZINE

(<https://www.stonehill.edu/alumni-magazine/summer-fall-2020/>)



Desa VanLaarhoven '01 and Beth Cronin '20 at Round the Bend Farm in Dartmouth.

SUMMER | FALL 2020 - FEATURES

A Basic Requirement for Life

Five Alumni Working on the Food Crisis

by Tracey Palmer

Food Insecurity. It's become one of those buzzword phrases. But what does it actually mean? The USDA introduced the language in 2006 and defined it as the disruption of food intake or eating patterns because of lack of money and other resources. In human terms, it means you're not sure if you can afford or get access to enough food to feed your family next week. It means you have to choose between buying medication and buying groceries. It means hunger is right around the corner.

A number of factors can influence your likelihood of suffering from food insecurity, including income, employment, race, ethnicity and disability. It can be long term or temporary, but it doesn't take much to push people into a food crisis. Layoffs at work, unexpected car maintenance or an accident on the job can suddenly force a family to choose between buying groceries and paying rent.

Since the pandemic outbreak and ensuing financial downturn, millions of Americans have found themselves facing uncertainty and anxiety about accessing and affording food. And just as the virus has disproportionately affected people of

color, so too have issues surrounding their ability to obtain healthy food. While food insecurity has traditionally affected lower-income people, many middle-class families are also experiencing this trauma for the first time.

Before the pandemic, about 37.2 million Americans were potentially food insecure. Over the next 12 months, experts predict as many as 54.3 million Americans will be food insecure—a 46% increase. The United Nations World Food Program estimates that COVID-19 will double the number of people suffering from a food crisis globally, pushing the total to 265 million.

The numbers are dire, but if you look beyond the headlines, you'll quickly realize that there is hope. In every city and town in America, people who run local farms and food pantries are stepping up to help. In Southeastern Massachusetts and beyond, Stonehill alumni are working on the forefront of the effort to end food insecurity.

“ We know that to be sustainable, we have to share. And we know that we can all make the world a better place.”

DESA VANLAARHOVEN '01

Desa VanLaarhoven '01

Round the Bend Farm Dartmouth, Massachusetts

In Dartmouth, Round the Bend Farm, A Center for Restorative Community (RTB), is more than just a place that grows produce. With Desa VanLaarhoven at the helm, it is a thriving community that strives to address the root causes of the multiple crises of climate, energy and food insecurity on both the global and local levels. RTB's core mission is to redefine wealth, value diversity and model nature using the basic tenets of sustainability—resiliency, zero-waste design, circular economy, diversity and spirituality.

“We believe that everything on this planet is interconnected,” says VanLaarhoven. “We know that to be sustainable, we have to share. And we know that we can all make the world a better place.”

When COVID-19 took hold in March, it never occurred to VanLaarhoven not to take action. “I felt like we'd been preparing for the moment since we built the farm,” she says. Based on 15 years of work building relationships with civic leaders in the region, VanLaarhoven knew that many of the people facing food insecurity on the South Coast were low-income families of color.

As the child of a diverse family herself—she has two adopted siblings, one African American and Korean and one Korean—she grew up acutely aware of implicit bias and systemic racism. The last thing she wanted to be was the presumptuous white woman coming to the rescue. Within days of her decision to act, she partnered

with the CEOs of three nonprofits in New Bedford—all women of color—to supply and distribute a free weekly share of healthy food to about 130 families on the South Coast. They named the initiative Manifest Love.

“We all believe in systemic change,” VanLaarhoven says of her partners. “And we couldn’t have accomplished any of this without each other.”

“ I’m seeing how everything is interconnected. What we do is so much more than farming. Food is medicine...and life.”

BETH CRONIN '20

Elizabeth Cronin '20

TerraCorps

Dartmouth, Massachusetts

Following in her fellow alumna’s footsteps, Beth Cronin has joined Desa VanLaarhoven at Round the Bend Farm (RTB), serving in a TerraCorps position. All it took was one field trip with her Stonehill Sustainable Agriculture class, and Cronin was hooked. “All I said was, I need to work here,” she says.

Raised in Holliston, Cronin has always felt at home around farms. Her passion for agriculture blossomed at a young age, when she joined a local 4H organization. At Stonehill, she worked with Bridget Lawrence-Meigs on the College's farm. A study abroad experience in Monteverde, Costa Rica, during her junior year solidified her commitment to sustainability, permaculture and environmental education.

Because of the pandemic, Cronin moved directly to RTB after her graduation in May, to live on the farm while she completed her 11-month service with TerraCorps. Run by AmeriCorps, TerraCorps places emerging leaders in communities to work on land conservation and education.

With much of the farm's education efforts on hold because of the pandemic, Cronin doesn't get to spend as much time teaching in RTB's school as she'd like. Most of her time is spent working on curriculum, coordinating farm help and assisting with the farm's free food share, Manifest Love. On top of earning a living stipend and eating community meals on the farm, Cronin lives in a tiny house on the property.

"I've been learning an incredible amount at Round the Bend," says Cronin.

"Especially during this crisis, I'm seeing how everything is interconnected. What we do is so much more than farming. Food is medicine...and life."

Thomas MacDonald '80

Harvest on Vine

Charlestown, Massachusetts

Tom MacDonald began working at St. Mary-St. Catherine of Siena Parish in Charlestown in 2003. One of the first things he did as director of social ministries was help launch a food pantry. “The pastor and I immediately identified a need in the neighborhood--food insecurity—and we started Harvest on Vine,” says MacDonald. The pantry began with seven clients. Today, it serves more than 800 families.

Since the onset of COVID-19, Harvest on Vine has doubled the tonnage of food it distributes each month. Not only has the number of families who need food increased, but the amount of food they need has grown because many more family members are at home. “The working poor, who once used the pantry as a stopgap, now use it as a primary food source because they’ve lost their jobs at places like the Encore casino, TD Garden and surrounding businesses,” says MacDonald.

While the unemployment rate in Massachusetts has dropped recently, it remains one of the highest in the nation. This doesn’t bode well for MacDonald’s pantry clients.

“The number of families that are new and returning is daunting,” he says. “We had more than 500 families come through over the summer and probably distributed somewhere in the neighborhood of 15,000 to 17,000 pounds of food. This is a 100% increase in the number of families who frequented the pantry this time last year.”

Sean Moran '13

One Acre Fund
Kakamega, Kenya

It's a bitter irony. A majority of the world's hungriest people are farmers. More than 50 million smallholder farmers in sub-Saharan Africa are locked in annual cycles of hunger and food insecurity because they're unable to grow enough food to feed their families. Sean Moran is playing his small part to solve that problem.

"I'm attracted to interesting and meaningful challenges," says Moran, Kenya systems division director at One Acre Fund, "like how to address this injustice in a financially sustainable way."

One Acre Fund is a nonprofit social enterprise that supplies financing and training to help one million smallholder farmers in Burundi, Malawi, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda and Uganda grow their way out of hunger and build lasting pathways to prosperity.

"Food is one of the basic requirements for life," says Moran. "It's inconceivable to me that we can put people on the moon, invent self-driving cars and make all sorts of scientific achievements, but people around the world still experience food insecurity."

Moran oversees a team of 160 that normally procures and delivers about 30,000 metric tons of supplies each year, manages about 15 warehouses across Kenya, makes sure call center agents are available to assist clients and ensures that client data is accurate and safe. As the pandemic spread to Africa, Moran found himself in the center of a massive public health effort.

In March, Moran and his team were in the midst of delivering fertilizers and other crucial supplies needed for the growing season. They quickly worked to collapse 25 days of deliveries into nine days. "It was one of the most impressive work outcomes I've been a part of," says Moran. "Everybody was laser focused on how to accomplish the goal at hand."

In the months since then, Moran and his team have been reevaluating many aspects of their operations. “We’re dealing with the same uncertainty the rest of the world is,” he says. “How can we continue our operations as safely as possible? How bad will the pandemic be in three, six, nine months?

How will our clients react to the situation? What government regulations are likely to be in place?”

While One Acre Fund is not a health organization, it has deep delivery expertise and trusted community ties. These are the tools they used to respond to the emerging needs of farmers during the pandemic. In many of the countries the organization serves, less than 15% of homes have basic hand-washing facilities.

With Moran’s help, One Acre Fund’s procurement teams reached out to suppliers to procure some five million pounds of soap, which they delivered to one million farmers for free. The nonprofit hopes to reach more than three million households in the coming year.

“Smallholder farmers are critical to global food security,” Moran says. “When global supply chains fail or become slower or riskier, it’s even more important that communities can feed themselves and their neighbors through local marketplaces.”

Pandemic aside, smallholder farming is a risky business. The average smallholder farmer works three-quarters of an acre by hand. Drought, flooding, pests and disease are always threats. But the biggest threat, Moran believes, is the climate crisis. “Unfortunately, all of the risks farmers face are compounded by climate change. Moving forward, most stories about food security will also be related to climate.”

“ But why are we accepting that this is a normal thing for people to have to do? In the richest country in the world, why can’t we get to a place where people can provide food for their own families?”

DENNIS CARMAN '82

Dennis Carman '82

United Way of Greater Plymouth County
Brockton, Massachusetts

As president and CEO of United Way of Greater Plymouth County (UWGPC), Dennis Carman is the leader of a regional nonprofit that collaborates with various other nonprofit organizations and government agencies to solve problems regarding homelessness, unemployment, education, health services and food insecurity.

Even before COVID-19, food insecurity was an increasing problem in Plymouth County, Carman says. Since the pandemic and ensuing economic crisis, the problem has been significantly magnified. In fact, according to Project Bread, food

pantries and soup kitchens in Greater Plymouth County have seen a 300% increase in hungry families and individuals coming on a regular basis for food.

“In the past, it was one in 13 people coming for help,” notes Carman. “Now, it’s something like one in nine, and one in five for families from diverse backgrounds.”

UWGPC directly supports food pantries run by Catholic Charities South, the Charity Guild and the Salvation Army in Brockton and Plymouth. Carman is all for providing emergency funding and support during the crisis, but looking ahead, he hopes our communities will find longer-term, more sustainable solutions.

“There are real needs, and we need to respond to them,” Carman says. “But why are we accepting that this is a normal thing for people to have to do? In the richest country in the world, why can’t we get to a place where people can provide food for their own families?”

As people from diverse racial backgrounds are facing greater and deeper challenges from the pandemic and economic uncertainties, UWGPC, under Carman’s leadership, is committed to paying significantly greater attention and sensitivity to the issues of race, equity and justice as they design next-step solutions.

“Right now, we need to move to a longer-term recovery model,” says Carman. “We need to be talking about deeper, systemic solutions.”

The Farm at Stonehill

In 2011, Stonehill established a farm in response to food access issues in neighboring Brockton.

Since its inception, students and staff who work at the 1.5 acre farm have grown and distributed over 95,000 pounds of fresh organic produce, thanks to relationships with partner organizations—the Easton Food Pantry, the David Jon Louison Family Center of the Old Colony YMCA, My Brother’s Keeper, Father Bill’s and MainSpring, as well as the Brockton Neighborhood Health Center (BNHC), where together they operate a Mobile Market.

Farm Director and Educator Bridget Lawrence-Meigs estimates that the produce reaches the tables of about 400 people each week during the growing season—people who may not otherwise have access to locally and organically grown food.

During the pandemic, the number of families in need has increased dramatically. “COVID-19 has shed light on how important our food producers are and has inspired people to think about where their food comes from,” says Lawrence-Meigs. “It’s my hope that these interests will deepen and more of us will start to ask important questions about the food that nourishes us—how it was grown, who grew it, how many resources were used to transport it from field to plate and how we can all make choices each day to support a food system that is more just, fair, equitable, humane and sustainable.”

In addition to growing food, The Farm serves as a living classroom for students of all majors who volunteer, intern or take classes there. “They learn about the environmental, social and economic issues connected to our food system and how they can help support the health of the planet and all people by working to create lasting solutions,” explains Lawrence-Meigs.

Celia Dolan '19 is one of a number of student volunteers who have continued to work on food justice issues after graduation—first as the assistant manager at The

Farm and now as a full-time associate with My Brother's Keeper, where she delivers food and furniture to families in need.

"Each day, I am reminded of something I learned at The Farm, especially now with the increased need for food access," says Dolan. "Food touches so many aspects of people's lives, from their health to their ability to focus in school to racial issues—it is central to life and wellness."

STONEHILL ALUMNI MAGAZINE

Summer | Fall 2020

[CONTACT THE MAGAZINE EDITOR →](mailto:KLAWRENCE@STONEHILL.EDU) **[TAKE OUR MAGAZINE SURVEY →](https://www.stonehill.edu/samsurvey)**
(MAILTO:KLAWRENCE@STONEHILL.EDU) **(HTTPS://WWW.STONEHILL.EDU/SAMSURVEY)**

[SUBMIT A CLASS NOTE →](https://www.stonehill.edu/alumni/keep-in-touch/)
(HTTPS://WWW.STONEHILL.EDU/ALUMNI/KEEP-IN-TOUCH/)

[RETURN TO THE MAGAZINE ISSUE'S HOMEPAGE →](https://www.stonehill.edu/alumni-magazine/summer-fall-2020/)
(HTTPS://WWW.STONEHILL.EDU/ALUMNI-MAGAZINE/SUMMER-FALL-2020/)

320 Washington Street, Easton MA 02357

508-565-1000 (tel:5085651000)