



Adrionna Fike

A Community Grocery Store Feeds Its People

Co-owner, Mandela Grocery Cooperative

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Adrionna Fike is a worker-owner at the cooperative Mandela Grocery Cooperative in West Oakland. Fike was drawn to the community-oriented co-op—which is owned and operated by young black people—when she relocated to Oakland in 2008. Raised in an athletic family in Los Angeles, Fike, who played basketball for Columbia University while attending Barnard College, grew up eating processed food before health challenges forced her to reconsider her diet. The grocery sells organic and conventional produce from small local farms, dairy and meat from nearby ranches, and wholesome packaged foods. The grocery store is slated to move to a larger location in 2018.



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Adrionna Fike had always dreamed of owning a neighborhood store selling good food that resonated with the community and held a particular concern for African American life. She imagined a store where African Americans felt welcome, that paid homage to historic black culture, and served as a place of nourishment in mind, body, spirit, and soul. She found such a home in West Oakland at the Mandela Grocery Cooperative, which opened its doors in June 2009 under the Mandela Foods Cooperative banner, with the goal of providing access to affordable, healthy, and culturally relevant foods. “From the day I set foot inside the store I knew I wanted to be a part of it,” says Fike, who came on board in 2012. The cooperative model, with its team approach and esprit de corps, appeals to Fike, who describes her workplace as a joyous environment where she can be herself. In turn, being of service to others feeds Fike. “I like serving people, that’s my calling and my reward, I receive so much back from our customers.”

West Oakland has long been overlooked by supermarket chains. Instead, corner liquor stores have proliferated. Such stores typically offer mass-market products of questionable

nutritional value, the kind of food that is detrimental to health and contributes to high rates of heart disease, obesity, and diabetes among African Americans.

A full-service grocery store has long been high on the wish list of residents of this community, which struggled for decades with high crime, pollution, and underemployment. West Oakland is considered a food desert by the US Department of Agriculture. The term refers to impoverished neighborhoods devoid of stores or markets selling fresh fruits and vegetables and other nutritious food. A historically vibrant enclave for African American artists, the area is experiencing a regeneration fueled by gentrification pressures from the San Francisco Bay Area’s technology boom. There’s also a resurgence of black culture in the area, from African American chefs and food producers to muralists, sculptors, and other creative makers—many of whom shop at the store, Fike adds. “The co-op is the face of the community, the guardian of food security here. It’s important to put resources into the places where people live,” says Fike.



Mandela MarketPlace, a nonprofit with a decade-old program that, among other efforts, delivers fresh fruits and vegetables to corner stores, was instrumental in opening the co-op. But in Spring 2018, the grocery store became independent of that organization, says Fike. Now, the co-op is attempting to expand by raising \$1 million through a crowdfunding effort and a proposal for soda tax funds from the city of Oakland. It's a pivotal time in the co-op's history.

In 2017, the grocery business landed a lease on an 11,000-square-foot prime corner spot next door to its current digs. The co-op originally wanted to occupy the space but lost out years earlier to a national chain store. The co-op's first location is just 2,500-square-feet, and some of that space houses a separate café. For years, the store—with its local produce and perishables, bulk-bin offerings, and dry goods—had to compete for customers with a 99 Cents Only Store next door (that store, which closed in early 2017, offered conventional packaged foods and produce at a deep discount).

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After the co-op opened in the midst of a nationwide recession it struggled early on. But sales grew modestly each year. Its customers reflect today's West Oakland: a diverse group of local resident, including people of color and low-income residents, commuters (it's opposite a BART stop), and a new wave of workers from San Francisco. Some are priced out of the city, some prefer the culture of West Oakland over the current climate in San Francisco, and some are well-compensated tech employees. The co-op also cultivates a



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strong youth culture among worker-owners and customers alike. The mix has helped keep the co-op’s doors open during tough times while also staying true to its mission.

But this isn’t a generic grocery store, nor is it some hippie counterculture co-op. It’s a modern market, with murals of African Americans on its window and a playlist that reflects the staff’s tastes. “We’ve succeeded because we’ve created a comfortable vibe,” says Fike, 35, of the team, which currently consists of three other co-owners and a half-dozen candidates on track to become co-owners. “It reflects the foodways, art, and style of African American culture and the people who work in the store are personable and genuine. Customers like the staff, the energy, the music.” All this helps make the co-op a destination, which is key since consumers can otherwise buy everything they need without ever leaving the house. “Everything about my workplace is gratifying—on both sides of the counter,” says Fike. “There’s respect from my co-workers and from the customers for what we’re doing here. We’re creating community and culture and, as a former anthropology student, that’s what’s most interesting to me. It is at the heart of what it means to be human.”

The co-op measures success in many ways. Getting produce to the people is at its core: From 2013 to 2016, the store distributed more than 700,000 pounds of fresh produce, 46 percent of it from family farms within 200 miles of Oakland, helping keep small farmers on the land by boosting their income. The co-op has circulated more than \$7 million within the local community.

The store looks for ways to make eating well more affordable. It features innovative programing such as Fresh Creds, a Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP or “food stamps”) match incentive. The co-op fulfills a federal grant secured by Mandela MarketPlace that entitles any shopper who spends money on fresh produce, frozen fruits and vegetables, or canned fruits and vegetable without added sugar to a 50 percent discount on those items. It’s been a hit with customers.

The cooperative also offers an owner like Fike the chance to be part of a business based on equality and inclusion in pay, profit-sharing, and a voice at the table. “This is a sustainable model,” says Fike. “When you operate ethically with integrity, honesty, and transparency, people respond to that and are inspired by that.”—Sarah Henry