

*There is one kind of prison where the man is behind bars, and everything that he desires is outside;
and there is another kind where the things are behind the bars, and the man is outside.*

-Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*



The Invisible Among Us – Healthy Food for All

By Claire Concepcion

I am an HFFA member and volunteer. In 2018, as a single, working mother living paycheck to paycheck, HFFA helped me afford a CSA share through their 50/50 matching program. In 2020, I struggled to pay my portion due to salary cuts. HFFA helped me—like so many other members—to receive CSA shares at little to no cost throughout the pandemic.



Fast forward to 2021. It is a cloudy, chilly afternoon in early March. I stand amidst corroded shopping carts, cardboard boxes, tarps, crates, broken appliances, bike parts, car batteries, filled trash bags, propane tanks strewn across a camp encircled by a grove of eerie, bare trees.

I am at one of the homeless encampments infamously known as the *Jungle*, with Richard Rivera Coordinator for Ultimate Reentry Opportunity (URO) and Opportunities, Alternatives and Resources (OAR), and Amber Tan, URO volunteer and Cornell University student. We are there to distribute warm meals made with vegetables, herbs and other wholesome ingredients from HFFA farmers and prepared by Executive Chef-Owner Sam Epps and staff at Gola Osteria.

I remind myself I am still in Ithaca despite being less than two miles from downtown. The trees are familiar, but the littered, dismal scene is not. The scene feels even more troubling during a global pandemic. The trees are trying to survive the winter, I pause to wonder, just like its fellow residents in the *Jungle*.

Richard calls for more soup and spoons from a distance. I carefully walk and navigate through litter, not knowing what may be valuable to someone in the camp. I find a clear path to an elaborate shelter made out of crates, wooden boards, plastic tarp and everything in between.

Richard and Amber are chatting with the resident who I assume built the impressive structure: his home. I admire the natural rapport Richard and Amber have with the residents. Richard calls them family. The man gratefully accepts a few containers of the warm chicken and vegetable soup with bread.



After we visit everyone at the camp, the rest of the warm meals are shared with people at the Southern Tier Aids Program, Saint John Community Center, Advocacy Center/Women's Domestic Abuse Shelter, Men's Rescue mission, West Village, Econo Lodge and Second Wind Cottages.

Over 7,000 warm and nutritious meals have been provided since last summer to people living in encampments and other precarious conditions through a collaborative effort by URO, OAR, HFFA and Gola.

URO Executive Director Taili Mugambee shared, “You can’t separate yourself from the way that you’re living, because you’re trapped in it by the things you’re consuming. If you’re eating trash, your system is trash. We’re changing this system by providing nutritious food with dignity, so folks are healing.” One of URO’s missions is to help create restorative and sustainable mechanisms for formerly incarcerated populations, which include a healthy diet that not only impacts physical health but also psychological health. “Fresh food is an absolute necessity to your own self-dignity.”

HFFA Executive Director Liz Karabinakis recognized the opportunity to obtain federal and local emergency food assistance funds to purchase fresh food from local farms for hunger relief. Upon securing a few grants from FEMA and Community Foundation of Tompkins County, as well as donations from individuals and through Friendship Donations Network, Liz created Nourish Tompkins, a new cross-collaborative initiative to help address food-insecurity amongst the most vulnerable community members during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Providing fresh produce and nutritious meals is not *the* solution but is an essential part that seeds hope and inspiration. HFFA’s collective of small farms is not in a position to tackle an entire broken system, but with our community partners we’re at the heart of advancing health, healing and restoring human dignity.” – Liz Karabinakis, Director of Healthy Food For All



Gola receives over 100 pounds of produce from HFFA every week, and creates 150 warm nutritious meals.

By leveraging HFFA's partnership with over a dozen local and organic farms, over 12,000 pounds of high quality fresh fruits and vegetables, beans, whole grains and eggs was provided for hunger relief in 2020. Over winter and spring 2021, an additional 4,000 lbs. of local produce has already been provided to date with plans to continue. In addition to supplying produce to Gola to make 150 meals weekly, HFFA's farm-fresh produce is also distributed through partners to over 500 families every week.



We all need healthy food, water, shelter, but we also need community. Not only is HFFA helping struggling single parents like myself to survive and thrive, but they are also providing fresh, local produce, warm nutritious meals and community support to the most marginalized and invisible among us. They are taking part in the collective and challenging work to restore dignity and hope to those most vulnerable.

As an HFFA member and volunteer, I am proud to be part of an organization that is helping to support and sustain the needs of ALL members of our community.

