

FOOD FROM THE 'HOOD

by Haydee Vicedo

Food From The 'Hood (FFTH) is the nation's first student-managed and operated natural food products company; it began on October 3, 1992, in response to the Los Angeles Uprising. The company is based at Crenshaw High School in South Central LA. After the Uprising, many Crenshaw High students were very disappointed with the events that left their community in shambles. As a response, with the help of science teacher Tammy Bird and volunteer business consultant Melinda McMullen, some of them created FFTH.

The students' first effort was to restore a weed-infested garden behind the football field and donate the food grown to feed the needy. By December 1992, the group harvested its first crop and donated 100% of its produce to a local homeless shelter and food bank. During the summer of 1993, the entrepreneurial bug hit the students and they trekked to a local Farmers' Market where they sold over \$150 worth of produce in just thirty minutes. A customer suggested that they market their own brand-name product and the students took this suggestion to the next level by researching possible products and by finally deciding to enter the salad dressing business. With the help of Sweet Adelaide, a manufacturer in nearby Hawthorne, the company was ready to launch its products. FFTH's "*Straight Out the Garden Creamy Italian Dressing*" was the company's first offering in 1994, followed by "*No-Fat Honey Mustard*" in 1996.

The company operates on the principles that profitable businesses can give back to the community, be socially responsible and environmentally friendly, and that young people can and do make a difference. Student-owners are expected to learn all aspects of running the business. Tutoring and mentoring are also available and participating students are encouraged to participate in SAT workshops and assisted through the college application process. Half of the company's profits go towards college scholarships for the "student-owners." Participants earn points based on how much time and effort they put in the business. Their points are converted into how much scholarship money they will receive upon graduation.

Today, FFTH is carried in more than 2,000 grocery and natural products stores in 23 states and will be soon be coming out with a new flavor, "*2000 Island Salad Dressing*." As of February 2000, the program funded over \$140,000 in college scholarships to past student-owners, allowing over seventy program graduates to attend colleges including Tuskegee, Morehouse, the U of North Carolina, Howard, and Cal Poly. The year 2000 also marked another great accomplishment, as twelve past student owners graduated from universities such as UC Berkeley and Stanford. In a school like Crenshaw High—which has a staggering 65% drop out rate—the successes of FFTH with its program participants are even more remarkable.

The bell has rung signaling another end of a school day, but Food From The 'Hood student-owners and interns are buzzing around the office just starting on their daily business activities. Talks of planning a food drive and when they'll be conducting interviews for new recruits go hand in hand with normal teenage banter about Spanish homework and who's going out with whom. Such exchanges indicate how much the program positively affects the students. To these young people, attending regular business meetings and trade shows is as normal as going to the homecoming dance. They join the program for various reasons: to earn scholarship money, to socialize with other kids, or to learn basic business skills, but they leave with so much more. FFTH nurtures students into becoming socially responsible, confident, and community-minded citizens. Behind the face of the first seed planted and a business venture lies a program that is giving young people the chance to reach their greatest possibilities. In the words of two program graduates:

“FFTH is a business but it teaches much more. We learn how to take responsibility for our actions, how to set priorities, and how to be leaders instead of followers.” **Terie Smith**, 1998 graduate.

“It doesn’t matter what you look like or where you live. If you can dream it, you can achieve it—and as you see, we are achieving it.” **Carlos Lopez**, 1996 graduate.

Note: There are now two other FFTH sister-companies forming in Ithaca, NY, and in Chicago.

Haydee Vicedo wrote this article in Oct., 2000, when she was Assistant Director of FFTH. Some material has been added to it from FFTH’s website.