

The Zest S12E16

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Dalia: I'm Dalia Colon, and this is The Zest: citrus, seafood, Spanish flavor, and southern charm The Zest celebrates cuisine and community in the Sunshine State today.

Bringing healthy food to urban neighborhoods. Okay. Yeah.

For many folks living in the inner city, meal options are limited to what they find in nearby convenience stores and fast food joints. But imagine if every city block contained a community garden teaming with fresh vegetables. That's the vision of Asha Walker. She's the founder of Health in the Hood. It's a Miami-based nonprofit that's tackling food insecurity with urban gardens, food distribution, and wellness [00:01:00] programs.

As you'll learn in our conversation, ASHA's commitment to improving her community has deep roots.

Asha: So for us it's a really simple solution to a huge problem. So Health in the Hood is a 501(c)(3). We're based in South Florida and we build vegetable gardens in food deserts. So we'll go into neighborhoods that are typically disconnected from local grocery stores or from healthy food in their communities, and we convert vacant land into large scale vegetable gardens.

We hire residents from the neighborhood to maintain the gardens. We teach educational nutrition programs in the gardens, and they really become our living classrooms for our educational nutrition programs. So we're trying to tap out food insecurity from every angle.

Dalia: Wow, that's incredible. How did you get into this?

Asha: So I can't take credit for the idea. Urban farming goes back way before I started and we call my dad the OG. I dunno if you've ever heard of Dr. Marvin Dunn. That's my [00:02:00] dad. Whoa, I didn't know that. I get that a lot.

Dalia: Oh my gosh. Okay. Tell people who your dad is. For people who don't know.

Asha: So my dad is og. He is the original gardener and also the original gangster if you know him.

But he, uh, is really just a pillar in the community of his, a historian of Black History. He was the head of the psychology department at FIU for 30 years. Um, and he's been an activist, uh, fighting for community change and for amazing causes for his whole life. And we had an urban farm as a side project of when I was a kid.

I did my Bat Mitzvah. The community service project in an urban farm in Overtown, that we would get funding from the CRA, the local city sort of municipality. And every year we would go in, get our grant, and I just sort of knew that you could transform a vacant lot into a beautiful garden and people would just automatically, innately really be connected to it.

And so that was really, the idea was born, that was 12 years ago, and it has just taken off. And really, people don't get mad when you're like. I'm gonna go some collard greens in your backyard. You cool with that? They're like, yeah, that that works.

Dalia: Wow. Okay, so, so this sort [00:03:00] of activism runs in the family.

That's incredible. Yes. What do you think it is about a garden that does get people excited, you know, to have it come to their community? Yeah.

Asha: I think what gets people excited about gardening is really just this innate connection to our food sources and also the sort of disconnection that we have that's sort of ingrained in our current day society, modern day society.

And so it's just really getting back to our roots. And so putting your hands in the soil, growing a green bean from a seed, watching a rugola sprout up and knowing that that's gonna nourish your body, you know, it, it, it's an easy sell and people are really, really, sort of drawn to it at, at our, at our deepest levels.

Dalia: Wow. So who are you targeting specifically?

Asha: So we're mostly in black and brown communities, as you can imagine. I think when you leave Miami, you start to get to more rural communities. But for

us, we target food deserts and technically the USCA defines a food desert as an area that's more than a mile away.

From a grocery store. So instead of like a Publix or a Trader Joe's, you've got like a mom and pop a bodega where [00:04:00] everything is really more shelf stable, a lot more processed options. So we're not necessarily talking about hunger, we're talking about a lack of nutrition. Um, and that's a real big difference.

So food insecurity is not that necessarily that you can't access food, it's that you can't access nutrient dense food. Um, and so we're targeting families that are experiencing food insecurity and that, you know, oftentimes have. Intergenerational plagues of chronic disease that are oftentimes diet related and many times preventable.

Dalia: Wow, man, that's such an important distinction because I was just thinking last weekend, my husband and I needed to like pop into a store for something and the neighborhood we were in, I was like, okay, well there's a Publix over there, there's a Sprouts over there, and they're in the process of building Whole Foods.

And then I thought, there are some people who don't even like. Have a place to go buy an apple. Mm-hmm. So that is why,

Asha: and what's wild in Miami is that totally wild. Is that also in Miami you've got gentrification, which puts these neighborhoods right next to each other. So we're not even talking about a mile away.

You might just be a few blocks away, but the price difference and just sort [00:05:00] of. Distinction from one neighborhood to the next really cuts people off from those, those sorts of access points.

Dalia: Yeah. It might as well be like a hundred miles away.

Asha: That's correct. Correct.

If your arugula is \$17 a bag, you're, you're not going there.

But if you're growing it in your backyard, I show our kids, I always tell them, you know how people told you money doesn't grow on trees. They lied to you. It grows in your backyard. You can grow it and you can make it a business. And

you deserve to have a local food ecosystem that you're managing and that you know you're benefiting from.

And. Serving your community. So that's another piece of the puzzle is really sort of, you know, creating these sustainable local food ecosystems that that will outlive us, which is the goal.

Dalia: Yeah, I love that. We've talked about food sovereignty on the show, so that's very much in alignment. Okay, you're the daughter of Marvin Dunn, which I did not know.

So you have that sort of can-do spirit in you, but there had to be some challenges along the way. So how do you actually. Implement this going from the idea to the arugula growing in the backyard?

Asha: Yeah, well, um, challenges definitely come with any sort of project, but I think [00:06:00] when it's something like this that is sort of so simple and so sustainable, you just figure out how to chip away at them.

So I would say one of our biggest challenges is funding. Really, that's kind of what most not-for-profits come up against. Community buy-in, not an issue. Being able to grow beautiful food in South Florida where we have almost year round growing is also not a problem. You'd be surprised. Hurricanes knock on wood, so far have not been an issue for us in 12 years.

We may have lost a few heads of collard greens that we do really well in storms. Our beds are, um, really fortified. We build them out of cinder blocks and we cement them. So they're really like, like actual physical structure. So they do pretty well in storms, knock on wood. Um, but really our biggest challenge is, is funding.

You know, we can scale as far as our. Foundation partners and, and corporate sponsors help us to get there. So it's really, it's a matter of, of funding and scaling.

Dalia: Hmm. Okay. When you were talking about how resilient you all have been and how you have overcome hurricanes and the, I'm thinking about the people that the food is for, and the [00:07:00] food is almost like a metaphor for those people because these are generations that have overcome all sorts of obstacles.

So do you, yeah. You got that. Do you, do you see it that way? I don't wanna put words in your mouth, but it's like as you're cultivating these crops, you're cultivating like whole communities and generations.

Asha: Oh yeah, yeah. There's this incredible like intergenerational learning that happens. You know, we've got grandmas that come out and they teach us about how to grow around moon cycles so that we can avoid pests.

And it's like your mind is blown. Kids' eyes perk up, and then you've got a kid that's plenty of green bean for the first time, and then there's this, this immediate connection to where their food comes from, and they're just like so excited and so much ownership and pride that comes over community. So it's, it's, it's pretty immediate and it's pretty powerful.

Dalia: Are there any hard earned lessons that maybe you can help somebody else to avoid?

Asha: I think going into a community can be tricky, and so a big piece of what we do is identifying community partners. Like we're not coming in like the, [00:08:00] you know, save the day, we're gonna fix everything. Like that is not our attitude.

We come in and we're like. This is what we do and we need community partners and we need you. We need the community. Like it's not you and them, it's us all together. So I think that's a really important part is like laying that foundation and that groundwork and really setting up your community partners and showing up, like you can't just do it once or twice and then leave.

You've gotta keep showing up to build that trust and to build those relationships that that helps you sustain for as many years as we have.

Dalia: Mm. Okay. Let's talk about you. Where did you grow up and what sorts of foods were on the table?

Asha: I grew up in Miami. I am a Dade County girl, born and raised, and I grew up in the Snackwell generation, so that sort of little bit of an almond mom diet culture, which I definitely had to break out of, and that is the whole sort of basis of my personal wellness brand and fully holistic and approaching health from, you know.

Mental, emotional food movement, longevity. [00:09:00] Um, but I grew up with healthy food on the table, you know, even though it was a little bit skewed

towards the diet culture, my mom really made sure that, you know, we didn't have fried chicken. We had Oprah's yogurt baked chicken, which was, I can still remember, it was just.

Awful, but it wasn't fried and it sort of ingrained in me that you can make healthy variations of food and it doesn't have to be punishment. I try to always encourage people to remember that wellness is not restriction. It's supplementing not just supplementing supplements, it's adding to your, your, your plan already.

So I had broccoli, we had spinach, we always had balanced meals, but I really had to parlay that into a more holistic nutrition kind of a profile for my adult years.

Dalia: Oh my gosh. Snackwells is bringing me back and I know there's like a 22-year-old listening to this going, I have no idea what that is. They were like, what the snackwells, these diet cookies that tasted like styrofoam.

But everything was fat free and loaded with sugar

Asha: and all artificial. And we didn't know. What we didn't know would probably kill us, but now we know better so we can [00:10:00] do better. Yes, Lunchables, I saw a commercial for lunch. There are still Lunchables. I know people are still. Enough to have commercials for them.

Like that just, that kills me. That's why I'm, we're on this mission is to really not just grow the food, but to also educate communities on what's in processed food and why it's so dangerous and how easy it is to really cut that out and add in natural whole foods that will serve us so much better.

Dalia: How do you teach that though?

Because you know what, Lunchables are convenient. Yep. Snackwells, were convenient. Yep. So how do you, how do you talk to, say a single mom? You know, raising her kids, working like barely has time to take a shower and tell her, now you need to grow your own kale Yeah. And cook it well. So,

Asha: so we definitely don't wanna, we wanna make it accessible and user friendly.

And so that's part of why we go into communities and I, my goal is to have a Health in the Hood Garden on every corner, like that's what it should be. We

shouldn't have grass and lawns, we should have vegetables growing. So that should be like the, the bottom line. And there should be organizations like Health in the Hood that are maintaining it and [00:11:00] making it part of the local food ecosystem.

So it's not on that mom to be out there growing her own kale. But we also try to teach one of those ways to get around the grocery store that. Make it really accessible. So frozen vegetables, canned foods, they get shunned and looked down upon when they really should not. Frozen vegetables have more nutrients than fresh, if you can believe it, because when you pick up the vegetable, it's really like a flour.

It starts dying. It starts wilting the nutrients, start leaving it. And most vegetables, you know, we think. Everything grows year round. It doesn't, it just travels 2000 miles to get to us and by the time it gets to us, it's lost a lot of its nutrient profiles. So we like to teach families how to really navigate the grocery store to make sure you're creating nutrient dense, easy meals.

You where you cook once, eat twice. So really kind of like user friendly tips to make it accessible and to just kind of break that stigma and that like rhetoric of like, it's hard and you have to have a million dollars to eat healthy. You really don't, and it's just a little bit of creativity and, and kind of a mindset shift.

Dalia: Yeah, for sure. And just start with one thing and build on [00:12:00] that. Yeah. So can you talk to me about what your maybe daily eating habits would look like?

Asha: Yeah, so like I said, I was a Snackwell Lunchables kid, so it took a while to break those cycles. And I just did a post the other day about like in my twenties, it was all about.

Killing myself in the gym and I won't work out for two hours a day. And like that was it. And then my third year was like, well, that's not working. I don't feel good mentally, holistically. And so I always started to develop a totally different approach to food movement and mindfulness. That now is really the basis of, of everything that I do.

So for me, it's listening to my body. I also like to make it a competition. So my kind of foundational food plate is to get as many colors as I can. I want an orange, I want purple, I want green all on one plate from natural food sources, not from food dyes. Um, and then I wanna make sure at every meal I've got a

protein, a healthy fat fiber, and a complex carb so that I'm really making sure that.

You know, without making it too complicated, I've got a balanced plate that's gonna serve me. I stay away from dairy and [00:13:00] gluten most of the time just 'cause it's better for, for me. I do a lot of food sensitivity testing so I know, but you know, some people it's okay for, so it's really like learning and listening to your body and, and figuring out what works best for you.

Dalia: That's great.

What do you do outside of health in the hood? You've alluded, it sounds like you have this whole like holistic approach to um Yeah. Taking care of yourself. So, so what else do you

have going on?

Asha: Yeah, so Health in the Hood is my first baby and once she really got her legs and I have an amazing team who just every day I [00:14:00] pinch myself, I can't believe I have such dedicated people who are so behind this cause that they wake up every day and are out there in glaring Miami Suns keep when this program's going.

Um, and so once that really got solidified about five years ago, I started to kind of branch out and I thought about, well, how do I. Parlay, this sort of holistic wellness practice that has served me so well with a broader audience and how do I exponentially share that? And just like health in the hood came to me in the shower.

The idea for my holistic wellness app came for me in the shower too. I don't know if it's just the cleansing of the water, but it really was like a lightning bolt. And I got my holistic health coaching certification back in 2021 and realized I didn't wanna coach people one-on-one. That wasn't the best use of my energy.

And so I thought, how can I really serve as many people as possible with these practices and wellness tools that have helped me so much? And so I built an app. It's called Cured. It's 70 modules focused on food, movement and longevity. That same, those same three pillars, and it really just walks users through becoming our own health coaches.

So like [00:15:00] I'm not here to tell you what's best for you. It helps you really peel back the layers and you're digging it through. It's self-reporting. So if you

tell the app. I'm not sleeping well this week, and I'm kind of bloated. It's gonna feed you. Why don't you try the sleep hygiene module, and why don't you try the gut health modules this week?

And then it's gonna walk you through a lot of journaling and reflective, uh, uh, questions and goal setting, and then real life activations of how to bring all those practices into your daily life so that they just kind of become seamless. And so it's really helping you become an expert in you and becoming your own cure.

Dalia: Ooh, I need this. What's the name of the app again?

Asha: It's called Cured.

Dalia: Cured. Okay. I I'm gonna be downloading it as soon as we're done here. Yay. Okay. So, so you've really devoted your, your adult life to helping people get healthy, you know, from the inside out. Yeah. So what brings you joy about that? A lot of people in the wellness space, they almost seem like gatekeepers.

Like they don't want Yeah. They don't want you to know how they're 45 and look. [00:16:00] 25 or they don't want you to know how they're sleeping through the night and you're tossing and turning. So what brings you joy about sharing this information and not just keeping it to yourself?

Asha: I think it was interesting starting a for-profit business, having run a not-for-profit for 12 years because I'm just not a salesy person.

Like, I'm not like buy my thing. Like that has never been, it's not on my DNA. Wanna serve, I wanna help people. That's what makes me feel best in, in my soul. And so I think it's just what I'm, what I'm sort of innately sort of programmed to do. And so it was kind of a funky transition to go from fully serving people and being a totally not-for-profit, you know, not entrepreneur, to becoming a wellness entrepreneur.

And so I think part of how my brand has grown and there's that authentic sort of organic. You know, growth of it is just what you said. It's, it's taking that not-for-profit sort of mentality and applying it to a wellness brand that really has that same core value of just serving people. And if you know the [00:17:00] app is able to produce some dollars on the backside, that's great, but my ultimate goal is for it to really serve as many people as possible and to create a happier, healthier world.

As silly as that sound, we just have never needed it more, and I just know. How different I feel and how differently I interact with the world when I'm feeling my best. And so that alignment I just think is so important and we can share that and it can ripple out across the world. So that's really my, that's what gets me up in the morning.

Dalia: Oh, that is such a good point. I feel like everybody. Adults especially are walking around not feeling their best, whether it's yeah, a gut issue or chronic pain. I had an injury and I've been going to occupational therapy for the past few months, and I'm like, look at all the people who are in here trying to get their, you know, health together and then go back into the world and they're in pain all day every day.

Yeah. You know, myself included.

Asha: Yeah. Inflammation, man. Inflammation is just the silent killer, and it's this low grade inflammation that. And it's not your fault. It's not [00:18:00] our fault. We are living in a pretty toxic world, and I don't say that to fear a monger or to make anybody scared or make anybody not leave the house.

Because also what's in our house is pretty toxic too, but it's really just about that awareness and kind of cracking ourselves open to, you know, exploring these things that can help us feel better holistically. Where it's not just I'm taking 10,000 sets because somebody told me to. It's really understanding what that's doing At a root cause level, that's what I'm most interested in.

It's helping us really peel back those layers to understand what is the root cause that's driving our issues.

Dalia: Okay, well since I have you, I mean, I didn't know we were gonna go here, but now I'm like with an expert, so I'm, I'm trying to fix my own self here. What do you think are like three things that are causing inflammation in me or that are in my house that are making my family feel worse than we should?

Asha: So, stress. We don't think about it. Stress will inflame the, you know what, aia, so that's the first one. I would say. Our food, our diet, you know, even the cleanest diets. Just really being aware of not just what we're eating, but even the order [00:19:00] in which we're eating it. So like keeping your blood sugar balance is a really great way to keep your inflammation low.

Now we're really gonna get into it. How do I do that? If you, so, if you put your, I'm not saying don't eat carbs. You need carbs to run, eat your carbs last. Have

your fiber, have your protein first, and that gives your blood glucose levels a chance to balance out before you have that carb that's gonna help, that's gonna spike it.

It just keeps your glucose more stable. So you're thinking about keeping your glucose levels stable all day. That's a great way to keep inflammation down. And then movement. Exercise, sweating. You know, people say that you don't really detox. It's like, yes, yeah, you do. That's what sweating is. So sweating is your body's sort of natural detox pathway.

So really getting that movement, getting your heart rate up and figuring out what kind of movement really lights you up. So it's not like, oh, I gotta go to the gym. It's like, oh, I'm gonna move my body today. That takes some exploration and some curiosity, but I guarantee you will figure out what that model is and everybody has a movement style that that, you know, speaks to them.

So I think those are three things that we can really do is manage our stress. Manage our diets in ways that can really [00:20:00] support glucose levels and then moving our bodies.

Dalia: That's great. Thank you. That was like a little free consultation of course before Someone besides me. Yes. You're going back to Health in the Hood.

It's such a great name. You could have called it something a little bit more vague like, yeah, healthy kids or you know, Uhhuh something where you're like, who? I don't necessarily know that it's black and brown kids. Why was it important for you to have Hood in the name?

Asha: Well, it's so funny. Well, I love alliteration so Hood.

I was like, no one's gonna forget that name. And I got a tiny bit of pushback. One person years ago was like, I think that's offensive. And I was like, that's because you are not in the hood. And like for us. We're there. So didn't feel like there was any separation between, like, it's not me calling a hood a hood, like we're in a neighborhood, it's a hood and that's what it is.

And so it just felt very aligned. It didn't feel like there was anything separate and it was sort of, you know, it's been 12 years and we've really lived up to that. We show up, we are in community, so it was [00:21:00] no reason for us to call it anything. Didn't sort of denote that and so it really stuck and everybody remembers it.

I mean, you don't forget health in the hood. That alliteration really like drives it home and you know what we do? I always feel like a, a title of an organization or business should. Tell people what you do in, you don't have people's attention for very long. So if you can tell people what you do in an instant, that's always really powerful.

Dalia: Yeah, it is a perfect name. If you have t-shirts, I will sign up to buy one. I think it's great.

Asha: Yay. Oh, yay. You know we we're so not-for-profit. We give our, our t-shirts away, so come volunteering, you'll get that is a, that is a terrible strategy. Kidding. We really should sell our merch.

Dalia: Oh my gosh, next time I'm down in Miami.

Yeah, that would be great, please. Okay. How do you think about health in the hood as far as the name or just sort of your mission given this current climate that's trying to sort of de-emphasize our differences?

Asha: Well, as a 501 C3, I am very, uh, diplomatic. But as you can imagine, it has been challenging.

It has been very challenging. I think, uh, we're living in a time [00:22:00] where it's easy to sort of put your head in the sand and people are really sort of living with blinders on. And so if we're not at the forefront of people's trajectories, then we kind of disappear. And so I think that's sort of at the basis of a lot of the agenda.

You know, there's a, a really important food access survey that is done every year by the USDA that is no longer. That just got wiped out. So that gives us really important data about where the most food insecure pockets are. That's gone. You know, at the beginning of everything, which felt like, feels like it was 17 years ago, but it was like just a few months ago, you know, we lost some of our largest food bank partners.

They lost their federal funding. We lost our funding to be able to get food from our food bank partners. And, and that was a huge, huge hit for us. We were serving a thousand families a week. We now are serving about 300 families a month when it comes to our food distribution program. So it's just, you know, I I, I have to tell moms who show up, who wait in line from 7:00 AM until we open at 9:00 AM.

If they're at the end of the line, I might not [00:23:00] have a basket of food left for you. And it's just gut wrenching.

Dalia: Oh my gosh. It's gut wrenching. Wow. So I could say a lot more, but it's gut wrenching. Yeah. Wow. Thank you for that. And you are very diplomatic. What do you need? You know, somebody's listening who's probably in your neighborhood and maybe has a little bit of extra time or money.

What if, if you had a magic wand, what would you ask for?

Asha: Uh, money funding. It definitely takes, that's where I'm not capitalistic, but I am a fundraiser and that's what we need. We have an incredible team made up of community members and just the most. Dedicated individuals you could imagine. And it costs money to grow food and to serve communities and to buy the soil and the seeds and the water, and the fertilizer, and the compost, and the trucks and the gas, and it just, it, it literally costs money.

And so for us, having a strong network of supporters, there's nothing, there's nothing else like it. Volunteering your time is incredibly important too. So coming out, we have volunteers, hundreds a year that come out and literally put their hands in the soil, which is great for your microbiome, which is great for your gut health, great for your brain health.

So volunteering, [00:24:00] and then also opportunities like this. Sharing our story on platforms like this is just, it's huge. So amplifying what we're doing, making sure people understand what food access is, what food insecurity is also really important, but most importantly are those dollars, definitely dollars.

Dalia: You said it. Yeah, money. Money, money. Okay. This is great. Is there anything we didn't touch on yet that you want people to know about health in the hood?

Asha: Well, I guess the biggest thing would just be that our goal is, I've said a little bit in the beginning of our talk, is to really replicate this model.

This should be on every. Corner of every food desert in the country. And so we're, we're really working diligently to, to create that model and creating a physical space where all of our programs live in-house. We've got our user-friendly pantry, our nutrition classes, our fitness classes, our urban gardens, our hydroponic gardens, and we can really blow this thing out.

That is our, our dream and, and opportunities like this to get to share. That is how we get there. So. If anybody has spaces available and dollars they wanna put behind it, that's really our next chapter that we're really excited about.

Dalia: Uh, well, thank you for taking the time to talk to me and I wish [00:25:00] you all the best.

Thank you. Asha Walker is founder of Health in the Hood. She shared her recipe for Glow Soup, which is perfect for fall, and you'll find it on our website, the zest podcast.com. I'm Dalia Colon, I produce The Zest with Andrew Lucas and Alexandria Ebron. The Zest is a production of WUSF, copyright 2025, part of the NPR network.