

# A COOP MEMBER OTHERWISE KNOWN AS A COMMUNITY GARDEN'S 'CHIEF CHICKEN STEWARD'

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By Sara Ivry

If you walk to the corner of Throop and Dekalb Avenues in Bedford-Stuyvesant you'll find, amid the northbound traffic headed towards Williamsburg, a peaceful oasis in a corner lot where once stood a school that Barbra Streisand is rumored to have attended.

It's Tranquility Farm, home to beehives, fruit trees, vegetable beds full of squash, Jerusalem artichokes, garlic, ginger, tomatoes, as well as 16 robust chickens whose feathers shimmer in the late autumn sun like silken petals. The eldest is Jojo. She

strides regally around small piles of leaves near the herbs. JoJo will be 10 next spring, and loyal caretakers are already planning a celebration.



PHOTO BY JENNIFER MACFARLANE

“We’ll have cake and invite the community,” Tranquility member, chief chicken steward and longtime Park Slope Food Coop member Alex LaMond tells me. “It’s truly a community effort to have chickens.”

A school social worker, LaMond is passionate about city ecosystems and readily praises all the stakeholders who’ve come together to make sure raising a cluster of chickens in Brooklyn is not merely a viable endeavor, but a thriving one.

**RAISING CHICKENS IS A COMMUNITY BUILDER. IT CONNECTS PEOPLE TO THEIR CULTURAL HERITAGE.**

There’s the Parks Department, whose GreenThumb initiative specifically supports community gardens. There are contacts at the Department of Sanitation, which regularly picks up rotted wood and other waste the garden needs to get rid of; and folks from the Department of Health who tirelessly work to keep Tranquility Farms rat-free. There’s the young architect in the neighborhood who measured and cut wooden panels to put on the coop to protect the chickens against bad weather, and the kids who painted those panels in bright, happy colors. There are the two young gentlemen who take turns with LaMond to feed the chickens and clean their coop every morning, and then twice daily when it gets cold and their water freezes and becomes undrinkable.

It’s a paragon of collaboration, one that took years to achieve. When community gardener Ena McPherson founded Tranquility Farm in 2011, she and fellow green thumbs dreamed of raising chickens. They even built an ad-hoc coop with that goal in mind. But they faced garden-related challenges borne of the fact that Tranquility, like many urban gardens, was established on an abandoned lot. Members had to spend a great deal of time, LaMond explains, “clearing up rubble, building beds, doing soil testing, getting all that together.”



When LaMond joined Tranquility in 2014, she helped make the dream of chickens—which was hers too—a reality. Now they’re a vital part of the garden, roaming freely through the grounds when members are about. Of course, they’re gorgeous and lay eggs—up to one a day per bird—but their critical contributions go beyond that. “They really build soil and they build ecosystems,” LaMond says.

She recalls results from soil testing in 2015 that indicated high levels of lead, a toxic remnant of an era when building codes were laxer and materials used in construction more perilous. Now, the garden has a sophisticated compost program which combines chicken and food waste to help fertilize its soil and crops. When the garden underwent testing last year, members were delighted to find their soil is now lead-free.

Now “we can actually grow food for our community, which we do,” she says, and the chickens serve as “ambassadors for the garden. Kids love them, elderly love them.

They bring people into the space. I can't tell you how times people walk by and they're like, 'Chickens. Oh my gosh! My family in Puerto Rico—' 'My family in DR—' 'Back when I was in Jamaica, my grandmother had chickens. I used to take care of them.' It's a community builder... it connects people to their cultural heritage."

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During the pandemic, LaMond had the opportunity to share her passion for raising chickens widely. Because people were staying home to eat at the time, egg sales skyrocketed and some areas experienced shortages. To address that dearth, many individuals as well as community gardeners became interested in raising chickens. In turn, Greg Anderson, a Community Engagement Coordinator for GreenThumb, asked LaMond if she'd be willing to teach a class on what it takes to raise chickens in community gardens.

That first year, the lesson was one-off and remote—LaMond Zoomed with participants from the garden's gazebo and offered insight about what it takes to get a coop together and rat-proof it, among other advice, and not to expect that egg bounties would lead to any significant profit. Public interest in the course grew, and Anderson asked LaMond if she'd teach again—and furthermore make her one-off lesson into a series.

She did so with the help of two fellow Tranquility members. In exchange, Tranquility received an expansive new coop for their feathered squad. It has designated, hay-filled nesting boxes, an area to sleep and a chicken run. After the course ran this year, Tranquility received \$6,000 from the Parks Department for their work—enough to help the garden open a bank account and plan for future means of ensuring sustainability, such as solar panels or fashioning a way to access reliable water from hy-

drants rather than depending on the whims of rainfall.



PHOTO BY JENNIFER MACFARLANE

Teams of members from community gardens from all five boroughs apply to participate in LaMond's course, which now runs monthly over half a year from spring through fall, and features guest speakers from the Departments of Sanitation and Health. At the end, participating gardens receive a new coop.

"We teach everything," LaMond says. "How we started, what the benefits are. Everything from chicken breeds to first aid. How to maintain the chicken coop, how to feed water, the mathematics of it, how many eggs can you expect a week. Where to source food from, how to get fresh water, cleaning, maintenance, all of that stuff."

LaMond sees herself not just as a teacher, but also as an enthusiastic student. The chickens are her tutors. "They teach me about patience, about livestock stewardship, which is different from obviously pets, but also how to care for animals, which is a really beautiful thing to coexist with animals and how we can coexist with them," she says. "We've had a couple of years where we really were close to rat infestation. So they've taught me about not giving up, and that's where it really takes community."

Being a "chicken lady" has also given LaMond greater appreciation for the Coop.

"All praise to the farmers and growers and chicken keepers and livestock keepers that are out there day in and day out in three-degree weather providing for us," she says. "It deepens your appreciation for what it takes to produce food. And that's the Coop, at least for me."

*A long-time Food Coop member, Sara Ivry lives in Clinton Hill with her son.*