Mayor Kelly Girtz on the future of affordable housing in Athens, p. 4

Reimagining opportunity and engagement for Athens youth, p. 6

Athens Land Trust brings fresh produce to community members, p. 9
As the pandemic (hopefully) winds down, we are reflecting on how the past year has highlighted the need for so much of our work. This newsletter focuses on how our youth programs — the Young Urban Builders, Young Urban Farmers and Young Conservation Stewards — offer opportunities to young people in Athens to gain work experience, earn wages, make valuable connections and become leaders in their communities.

Over the past eight months, Athens has seen a dramatic rise in youth violence. The disproportionate impact on black and brown boys is staggering and the youth who have been through our programs do not remain untouched. One outstanding alum of our youth programs, Willie Craddick, Jr. was a junior at Georgia State University and serving as an Athens Land Trust board member when he was murdered in January of this year. As a young man, he served as an ALT camp counselor and youth program mentor. As a Young Urban Farmer, Willie was introduced to an indie publisher who helped him publish two books — They Counted Us Out and The Life of a Boy With Big Dreams — about his life and the lessons he was eager to share with other youth.

Willie may have grown up in our programs, but through his hard work, big thinking and big living, he helped us and other young people grow as much or more than we helped him. Willie remains an inspiration to us. This issue is dedicated to his memory.

Athens Land Trust is a nonprofit, 501(c)(3) organization whose mission is to improve quality of life for all and to strengthen the fabric of the community through education and the stewardship of land for purposes of affordable housing, conservation, agriculture, and economic development. We respond to community-identified needs and build individual and collective power among historically marginalized people.
Above: ALT’s Heather Benham meets with area homeowners to complete property tax appeals. Long term residents can face displacement pressures from rapidly rising tax bills without realizing the associated benefits of higher property values.

Below: Young Urban Farmer Re’al Pogue performs with his band, The Golden Beets, at the West Broad Farmers Market Juneteenth Celebration on June 19, 2021 at the Athens Housing Authority. In May, the Market began hosting in-person special markets once per month. (See page 9 for the market event calendar).

"...A chance to be in the wilderness, and help it thrive."

-- Genesis, age 15, on being a Young Conservation Steward

Cover: The “Rooting for Community” youth summer camp was held in June, providing scholarships to nine families for children ages 6 - 12 to experience nature and farm life, practice communication, and celebrate community. Here campers meet farmers participating in ALT’s Farm Incubator Program at Williams Farm.
Expanding affordable housing in Athens has been an important goal for Athens Land Trust since it was founded in 1994. As a local policymaker, Kelly Girtz has long shared that goal. In 2007, Girtz was elected to the Athens-Clarke County Commission. Today, he’s Mayor. (He was elected in 2019.) During that time, he’s both witnessed ALT’s work and fostered partnerships between ACC and ALT. We asked him to reflect on ALT’s efforts to expand affordable housing over the years.

How did you first start to work with ALT as an elected official? Prior to my election to the ACC Commission, I was familiar with ALT’s land conservation work, and had some friends and neighbors who volunteered with them. Early in my tenure, I learned of the greater breadth of ALT’s work in the affordable housing space, which has been a valuable addition to the continuum of options that allow Athens residents to build equity and get out of the rental rat race.

ALT’s affordable housing efforts are multifaceted: using long-term leases to create permanently affordable homes; building new homes; and providing below-rate rental units. But there’s more ALT’s been involved with, including helping finance and implement home repairs, financial counseling, enhancing fresh food access, and advocating for infrastructure improvements to strengthen existing neighborhoods. Do these efforts help with affordability?

"I have no doubt [ALT] will continue to play a huge role in Athens as a housing provider...and connector to so many other resources for Athens residents."

ALT has been helpful for myself and Commissioners in several experimental or “pilot” efforts around inclusionary zoning, and ALT Director Heather Benham has been a great contributor to the formal ACC Inclusionary Zoning Working Group that is now active to help us get into place the legal code sections and mechanisms that will allow an appropriate scaling-up of efforts. It is clear that simply getting into affordable, quality housing is a challenge in today’s market (a nationwide challenge, in fact), and we simultaneously want to shift as many residents as possible into homeownership, which can only be imagined if people at least have stable housing prior.

Do you expect ALT to continue to play a key role in ACC’s affordable housing efforts? What does the future of affordable housing in Athens look like?

Given the strength of ALT’s work, I have no doubt they will continue to play a huge role in Athens as housing provider, housing counseling agent, and connector to so many other resources for Athens residents. Inspired by much of ALT’s programming, I expect that a key element of affordable housing will be integrated housing, in which affordable units are scattered throughout the community, rather than being isolated in historically lower-income areas. Housing in the coming years will also come in a greater variety of forms: some smaller units, condominiums, townhomes, multistory/multifamily units, as well as single family lots.
Hey everybody, meet ALT's newest staff members!

Ashya Fambrough is a HUD-certified Housing Counselor, which means she's trained to provide coaching and facilitate workshops on the home buying process, financial literacy, budgeting, credit repair, rental issues, fair housing, and more. She also helps connect home buyers with purchasing programs. Ashya has a bachelor's degree in business administration and accounting from Georgia State University. She has worked in management and subsidized housing. "What excites me about working at Athens Land Trust is seeing the joy that comes across a client's face when they realize that homeownership can be in their future," she says. “Sometimes we just need to hear that it can happen and then we believe it for ourselves.”

Marquita Richardson is the Director of Affordable Housing. Marquita originally joined ALT staff as the Affordable Housing Program Operations Specialist. Now, she manages the full range of ALT's housing programs. Marquita herself became a homeowner through ALT's programs. She has worked more than 11 years with the local community, providing employment and development services and volunteering with local youth as a mentor and coach. She holds a bachelor's degree in business administration specializing in human resources and business management. "I'm excited to be assisting with tackling the issue of affordable housing in the Athens area," Marquita says. “I hope to expand my relationships with the community and assist individuals on achieving their dream of homeownership. It is rewarding to see others become homeowners as well.”

Michael Roberts has come home to the South to serve as Director of Impact & Strategic Initiatives. He will support ALT's efforts through fundraising, evaluation and solidifying key partnerships. He's been working on sustainable development, social and economic justice, and climate resilience issues for a long time, including building enterprise opportunities for small and mid-scale farmers and bringing resources to protect the land and farms of marginalized communities. Michael has a master's degree in environment and sustainable development from University College London and a bachelor's degree from the University of Richmond. "ALT is one of the rare organizations that is both deeply rooted in community and capable of solving larger-scale systemic issues," Michael says. "I hope I can help ALT in telling a big-picture story while bringing more resources to the communities and people that need them most.”

Chadsity Young is the Director of Operations, managing day-to-day operations with positivity and a real passion for her community. Born and raised in Athens, Chadsity has been active with ALT for two decades. She recently graduated from Kennesaw State University with a bachelor's degree in integrated studies with a specialized track in leadership. "I am excited to be working with an organization that is committed to seeing that everyone has an equal opportunity to thrive in this great community," she says.
Feature Story
Youth Development is Community Development

How Athens Land Trust's youth programs take a holistic approach

Athens Land Trust’s three programs for youth — Young Urban Farmers, Young Urban Builders and Young Conservation Stewards — pay young people wages, provide training, personal development, and work experience. These are classic goals for youth development programs. But ALT’s programs add another dimension. They help empower young people who have historically had little say in their own futures to take on leadership roles to shape solutions for themselves, for their neighborhoods and their communities. That’s how and why youth development becomes community development.

The popular education model
ALT's youth programs are housed under the organization’s Education & Empowerment department. That department draws on the tradition of “popular education”, a model whereby teachers take into account the lived experiences of their students (whether young or old), and students are encouraged to become active, engaged leaders in shaping solutions to problems they themselves identify.

Food insecurity, environmental justice, housing and energy cost burdens and unemployment are interconnected. Historically excluded and underrepresented people, including youth, understand this, and that's why ALT began in 2013 its first work-based education program to engage underserved youth in making systems change, starting with the food system.

Young Urban Farmers
The Young Urban Farmer program (YUF) teaches sustainable agriculture, entrepreneurship and other skills through a social justice lens. Growing food teaches problem-solving, enhances observation skills, and connects young people to the land with a greater appreciation for its connective power. They learn not only about issues such “food deserts” but also about the systems that create these issues.

Many students return year after year, becoming leaders and mentors to new participants. They also work as counselors at ALT’s summer farm camp. ALT adds external leadership development opportunities to the mix. For example, youth have attended the Black Farmers and Urban Growers (BUGS) Conference, where they connected with Black farmers and shared their experiences about farming and improving local food systems.

Former YUF have gone on to study agricultural sciences in college, become full-time farmers, and—in the case of Willie Craddick—join ALT’s board of directors.
Young Urban Builders
The Young Urban Builders (YUB) program started in 2018 to address youth unemployment and perform owner-occupied rehabilitation in the West Broad neighborhood, where the YUF help operate the West Broad Community Garden and Farmers Market, and where many long term homeowners saw ALT’s work to build new permanently affordable homes and asked for related help with their existing, aging homes.

The YUB program provides job training and experience on community projects. Among other things, YUB participants work with licensed contractors to learn workplace safety, proper use of tools, how to read blueprints and use applied mathematics. YUB students are involved at all stages in the rehabilitation process.

With more than 60 homeowners registered for repair and rehabilitation services, ALT has kept the YUB program going during the pandemic by prioritizing outdoor work. This included training by working with Burney Harris-Lyons Middle School to construct picnic tables for outdoor classrooms.

As they transfer these skills to residential projects, YUB continue to get specialized lessons with other professionals -- shadowing an electrician during the rewiring of a home for example. On-the-job training includes OSHA certification, and off the job site, students get guidance on graduating to trade school, college, or apprenticeships in the field.

Young Conservation Stewards
The Young Conservation Stewards (YCS) is a summer employment and job skills training program for high school-aged youth that empowers young people to be advocates for environmental justice in their community.

YCS participants learn to identify plants, remove invasive vegetation, and install and maintain native plants in parks and other public lands throughout Clarke County. They develop skills in community outreach, and engage the public at venues including the West Broad Farmers Market, where they have spoken about the importance of green spaces and the ways that community members can contribute to improving them.

In their current partnership with Athens-Clarke County, YCS crews are helping restore trails and improve outdoor recreational areas on 15 acres at Southeast Clarke Park, the county's largest public park.

Many families near the park face high poverty and barriers to employment. High poverty areas are often correlated with fewer parks and open spaces. Where these spaces exist, improvements can increase access to these amenities for low-income residents and communities of color.

These three youth development programs show how ALT has long viewed that helping to engage young people in meaningful, community oriented work is not only essential to youth development; it’s also essential to community development.
Tawana Mattox has a doctorate in educational leadership and is a member of the local board of education. Even so, she's back in school to sharpen and deepen her advocacy skills for environmental justice at the community level.

Dr. Mattox, who is ALT’s Director of Education & Empowerment, is part of the 2021 class of the Partnership for Southern Equity’s (PSE) Just Energy Academy (JEA). The class aims to develop advocacy skills so that participants can become more effective energy equity and climate justice leaders in their communities. PSE is an Atlanta-based nonprofit that promotes racial equity and shared prosperity for communities in the South.

"The work I'm already doing has propelled me to do more -- and learn more -- about the racial and socio-economic inequalities that are prevalent in our community..."

-- Dr. Tawana Smith Mattox

"Energy equity" and "climate justice" refer to the fact that low-income communities and communities of color are more likely to suffer from environmental hazards than are white and higher-income communities. The terms also refer to efforts to improve conditions and fairly share benefits and burdens.

Mattox is already a local leader on these issues, one who is passionate about sharing her knowledge and developing other community leaders. Take ALT's West Broad Sustainability Project, for example. Through this project, residents of the historically Black, gentrifying West Broad neighborhood identified environmental challenges such as flooding, poor household insulation, inefficient appliances, high energy costs, plumbing issues, and hazardous tree canopy. The residents then engaged with local government to tackle these challenges—with tangible results: 15 homes are more energy efficient; three churches have audited energy usage and made repairs; 18 water-related projects have been completed; 20 hazardous trees have been pruned or removed; and 10 new native trees have been planted.

So why is Mattox "back in school" for environmental justice leadership?

"The work I'm already doing has propelled me to do more and learn more about the racial and socio-economic inequalities that are prevalent [in Athens], about the history of these inequalities, and about energy policy and climate change," says Mattox. "To do more, I need to be a scholar in this area."

When Mattox graduates from the JEA later this year, Athens will not just gain one more better prepared leader, but someone who is passionate about inspiring others in our community to become leaders for energy equity and climate justice.
Whymss Farms and ALT deliver fresh produce to 21 homes for 12 weeks
Grant from UNFI Foundation supports effort

Every week the produce arrives by truck—cabbages, onions, radishes, turnips, carrots, herbs. Any remaining soil fresh from the farm is brushed off, and the produce is placed into sturdy brown paper grocery bags. A nutrition newsletter is slipped in, and the bags are delivered to the front doors of Athens households.

The produce comes from Whymss Farms (pronounced whims) in Carlton, Ga., about 30 miles west of Athens. Whymss Farms is John and Sharman Whymss, a Black husband-and-wife team who started farming—and selling at ALT's West Broad Farmers Market—in 2016. Their farm became Certified Naturally Grown in 2019.

For 12 weeks, 21 low-income households in the West Broad area will get this farm-fresh local produce delivered free of charge to their homes. About that nutrition newsletter that's included: it contains cooking tips and recipes, information about where to access other food resources including SNAP benefits, WIC, where to double their EBT dollars, kids' summer food programs, and information about the West Broad Farmers Market, including invitations to special in-person markets starting this summer.

This effort is made possible by a grant from the UNFI Foundation, the charitable arm of United Natural Foods, Inc., a national wholesale distributor of healthy food. The effort shows—on a small scale—a big part of what ALT is dedicated to doing: helping small farmers, including Black farmers, grow their business, make connections, and help nourish underserved families and neighborhoods in Athens with healthy local food.

What's New at the West Broad Farmers Market?

The drive-thru market is open through December 11. Orders are accepted from Sundays at 5:00 p.m. to Thursdays at 1:00 p.m.

Order online: wbfm.locallygrown.net
Order by phone: (706) 765-4020
Pick up Saturdays from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Visit linktr.ee/WBFM for more info on all things WBFM!

In-Person Market Events

• August 14: Summer of Fun Celebration
• October 16: Fall Festival
• November 20: African American Heritage and Urban Agriculture Festival
• December 4 and December 11: Holiday Markets
More than 150 acres of forest and agricultural land in Morgan County—about 30 miles south of Athens-Clarke County—got protected earlier this year under a conservation easement with Athens Land Trust.

The protected land, named Bramble Creek, comprises more than 100 acres of natural hardwood and mixed forest, about 20 acres of pine forest that can be managed for timber, and more than 35 acres of agricultural land. Horses are maintained on the land, and there are also "Blue Line Streams". (These are streams that flow most or all of the year and are typically indicated on topographic maps with blue lines.)

The conservation easement for this land provides for the agricultural portion of the land to be carved out as a farm in the future—creating the opportunity for a new or beginning farmer to own and live on their own farm.

Charlene Kickbush, the landowner, said putting the property under a conservation easement was a way of honoring the memory of her late husband, Thomas Richard Greer. "Tom was a true southern gentleman," Kickbush said. "He was a people-person, always most generous of his time, knowledge and expertise—but he was always happiest and most at peace here on the farm."

While searching for land to buy in the 1980s, Kickbush said she and her husband, “Literally took one look at the long driveway leading to the creek, house and woods [on this property], and we instantly knew we were home."

"Bramble Creek is truly a magical place and will continue to remain so for all who live here."

-- Charlene Kickbush, landowner

This project was a collaboration that involved not just the landowner, but also the Madison-Morgan Conservancy (a nonprofit dedicated to preserving historic sites, green space, farmland and timberland in Morgan County).

"This project was close to our hearts," said Justin Merrifield, ALT's Conservation Director. "We had the opportunity to work again with a longtime partner--Madison-Morgan Conservancy--as well as a special landowner dedicated to conservation. We're really looking forward to stewarding this special property."

Kickbush agreed: "Bramble Creek is truly a magical place and will continue to remain so for all who live here."
Thank You To Our Partners, Members, and Donors!

Keep up-to-date on the latest ALT news!

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By donating today, you become an Athens Land Trust member. With your support, we can improve quality of life for all and strengthen the fabric of the community through education and the stewardship of land for purposes of affordable housing, conservation, agriculture, and economic development.

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(online donations made through Click & Pledge)

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