

## **Vertical Farming: Businessman Alaric Overbey Is Primed to Rescue the Food Desert that is South Dallas**

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Stocking up on produce and general grocery items for the household is a monthly practice for many families around the greater Dallas area. For others – such an excursion is an uncommon luxury.

Imagine wanting to purchase items that are in the absolute best interest of your health and the health of others members of your household, but only having one shopping option within reasonable walking distance.

Even in 2016 a large portion of our adult population in Dallas is without personal transportation and relies heavily on public transit. Downtown Dallas is mere minutes away from South Dallas, yet can seem like a daunting feat for those with limited resources.

One bus ride can quickly turn into three bus rides. And then a shopping trip can produce baggage that must be toted back onto the bus.

Over the years South Dallas has been coined the “food desert,” as it lacks an array of healthy dining options, fresh produce stations and diverse grocery stores. In fact there is only one true-to-form grocery edifice – the longstanding Minyards that sits adjacent to Fair Park.

So how exactly do we reach some sort of resolve in the food desert?

Insert Alaric Overbey and his growing company Vertical Life Farms. The young businessman carries with him everywhere a contagious affinity for vertical tower gardens. Ask him about the technology and the finesse of these towers and his face simply lights up.

The tower gardens are used to grow food using a vertical aeroponic system. With little to no difficulty, the tower gardens can produce virtually any vegetable and/or fruit and the system can function on a rooftop, patio, balcony or even an office space with adequate natural light.

Overbey is such a tower garden enthusiast that he has his Deep Ellum space decked out in vertical tower gardens.

“My goal is to be able to sell as many tower gardens as possible,” says Overbey. “As a result I’ll be able to start a much needed food initiative.”

Overbey hails from San Jose, California, but believes that his mission of vertical farming not only chose him – but it also led him to Dallas.

“The people in Dallas are definitely different,” says Overbey. “But that’s because their problems are different.”

During his first several months in Dallas, Overbey made a special effort to delve into the communities of both South Dallas and Oak Cliff. He wanted to talk to the residents and understand their concerns and frustrations.

"I learned quickly that many residents want to shop and eat healthy food," says Overbey. "People, however, spend their money on what is close."

South Dallas is full of soul food, fast food, barbecue and overall feel-good eateries. The "on-foot" members of the community understandably elect to frequent the aforementioned places more often than journeying far north and to more affluent areas for healthier food options.

According to Overbey, food deserts like South Dallas can be linked to preventable heart disease and diabetes, along with a variety of other medical conditions.

Overbey introduced a new program at Dallas' Sarah Zumwalt Middle School this academic year. On a biweekly schedule he helps students grow their own produce using the tower gardens. The students have been extremely receptive to both Overbey and to Vertical Life Farms.

"You'd be surprised how many students would love to have salad bars at school," says Overbey. "Imagine how excited they would be to eat foods that they actually grow."

Many local students are provided free breakfast and lunch. The items are pre-packaged and expensive for school districts because of the packaging and transporting of goods. While common belief is that healthier eating is more expensive – growing foods and preparing them in-house would actually be more cost effective.

"The goal is to teach young people the cycle of food," says Overbey. "They need to understand it all – from the growth process to the preparation."

The objective is simple: bring better food options to the less affluent areas in Dallas. City leaders like Councilman Casey Thomas have been extremely supportive of Overbey's hopes for adding better shopping centers in urban neighborhoods. Vertical Life Farms has also gotten several receptive ears from city leaders about expanding the movement of the food towers. Overbey is adamant about educating people on healthier food choices.

There is no denying the fact that Overbey wants organic food to be available at a regular price. Vertical Life Farms is primed to offer high-quality, moderately priced produce to under served communities.

"This not a job for me," insists Overbey. "I do this all day, every single day because this is something that I enjoy."

"We want to feed the world," says Overbey.

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