



# From FINANCE *to* FARMING

MISSISSIPPI'S LARGEST URBAN FARM SPROUTED FROM ONE WOMAN'S VISION

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Story by GINA SMITH

It isn't unusual for farmers to dip their toes into policy work to advocate for legislative change, but Dr. Cindy Ayers Elliott flipped that script. When she founded the state's largest urban growing operation, Foot Print Farms in Jackson, in 2010, the Mississippi native had an impressive background in state policy work and finance but no farming experience.

A self-described "Mississippi girl with Mississippi mud on my boots," Ayers Elliott wanted to attend college in her home state as a young person. But because of her family's decades-long involvement in a class-action lawsuit to improve funding for Mississippi's historically Black universities and colleges, she attended the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where she ultimately received a master's degree in urban planning and finance.

A graduate school internship brought her back to Mississippi to work with then-Gov. Bill Allain,

where she became acquainted with state legislators, later serving as assistant to former state Treasurer Marshall Bennett and helping found First American Bank, the first Black-owned bank in Mississippi since Reconstruction.

Though her roots stayed deep in Mississippi soil, Ayers Elliott spent years working as an investment banker in cities all over the U.S. and abroad. She was on the job in New York City's financial district in September 2001 when her life changed.

"9/11 made me think about what I wanted to do when I grew up," she says. "And it wasn't banking in New York, so I came back home to Mississippi."

## FROM POLICY TO PLANTING

Back in Jackson, and with her family's lawsuit finally settled, Ayers Elliott joined the inaugural class of Jackson State University's Executive Ph.D. in Urban Higher Education and took a job as CEO of the Delta

Foundation, a nonprofit specializing in economic development for Black farmers in the Mississippi Delta. Her work was to encourage Delta farmers to take advantage of U.S. Department of Agriculture policies and programs. But with the 1999 Pigford v. Glickman lawsuit by Black farmers against the USDA for discriminatory loan practices still fresh, the growers were skeptical.

"They told me, 'little girl, you don't know anything about farming,' which was true. But, I knew about policy," Ayers Elliott says.

So in 2010, she decided she needed to get growing and create a model for what Mississippi farmers could achieve.

"I took my tennis court and converted it into a tennis garden, which I named the Serena Williams Tennis Garden," she says. "I had about 15 raised beds built and planted seeds of greens, lettuce and tomatoes. Everything grew and every box was full of food."

From the first harvest, she

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Previously an investment banker in New York and CEO of the Delta Foundation, Dr. Cindy Ayers Elliott established a 68-acre urban farm called Foot Print Farms in Jackson. While her lifestyle and looks changed, she still rocks her pearls and signature pink.



The mission of Foot Print Farms is to grow food but also introduce youth to agriculture, increase community access to healthy foods, use food to address health issues, create entrepreneurship opportunities and focus on environmental stewardship.



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- DR. CINDY AYERS ELLIOTT

developed a five-year plan for her 68-acre urban farm, applying for and receiving USDA assistance through the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

“I was in that office so much people actually thought I worked there,” she says. “I went in wearing red-bottom stilettos and a money suit, driving a big Mercedes and said, ‘I want to be a farmer.’ And believe me, I got some looks on that.”

Today, Ayers Elliott may have traded in the high heels for work boots, but even out in the fields on her tractor, she still draws attention wearing her grandmother’s pearls and signature color combination of pink and green. The colors honor her college sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha, one of the world’s oldest Black sororities. But, the pink also highlights her role as a woman farmer and green symbolizes the earth and the bounty it can produce.

### **GROWING A HEALTHY COMMUNITY**

In addition to meat goats and cattle, Foot Print Farms, which operates as a worker cooperative, grows a variety of specialty crops year-round in 10 high-tunnel grow houses on 10 acres of land. Through its Community Supported Agriculture program and at the Mississippi Farmers Market, customers find everything from kale, carrots and onions to tropical crops like callaloo (a high-protein Caribbean green) and edible hibiscus.

But growing food is only part of Foot Print Farms’ mission. Through various farm programs, Ayers Elliott focuses on introducing youth to agriculture, increasing

community access to healthy foods, using food to address health issues like diabetes and heart disease, creating entrepreneurship opportunities for community members, and intentional environmental stewardship.

This year, through a partnership with the Jackson Medical Mall Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and other groups, Foot Print Farms has launched Farmers Hands Culinary Kitchen. This commercial kitchen is used for value-added food ventures that aim to support local farmers, reduce food waste and provide entrepreneurial opportunities.

Named the 2021 Farmer of the Year by the Mississippi Association of Cooperatives, Ayers Elliott keeps as busy with local and national policy work as she does with the farm and its programs. She’s chairman of the Hinds County Soil and Water Conservation District and works with the national Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers Policy Research Center to help stop the decline of Black-owned small farms.

“Policy is important,” she says. “If policy work isn’t done, you don’t get to do anything else. You have to look at who’s at the table when the regulations are being written, and when these policies are going out, look at the overall project, what it can do and what can be done.” ◀



To learn more about Foot Print Farms, visit [footprintfarmsms.com](http://footprintfarmsms.com).



## **LOOKING FOR A START IN FARMING?**

**Take the first step with the New Beginning Farmers, Ranchers, and Veterans (NBFVR) Program at Alcorn State University.**

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- Crop farming practices
- Forest management
- Farm financial and risk management
- Diversification and marketing strategies
- Food safety
- Recordkeeping

Let the experts at the Mississippi Small Farm and Agribusiness Center (MSFAC) help you succeed in farming and ranching. Established in 1988, MSFAC promotes, enhances and facilitates the development and growth of small farms, alternative enterprises, and agribusinesses across the state.



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