

“Osafa’s Oasis Farm,” *Stockman Grass Farmer*, December 2022

by Christine E. Black

Randy Toranzo was known as “The Chicken Man” to neighbors and area children for his work at his and his wife, Jamila’s, South Side Chicago half-acre urban farm. Children often opened the chicken house gate to look at his 100 chickens. Sometimes chickens accidentally got loose and ran down city streets; neighbors helped put them back, Toranzo said. They didn’t complain about roosters crowing either, he said.

“They said the sounds made them feel like they were not in the city,” Toranzo said. Visiting neighbors often pet his chickens, brought food to feed the goats -- and he gave away baby chicks. Intercity children and teens visited for school trips while Toranzo taught about caring for animals and growing food. He and his wife also had two goats and two sheep.

He learned about chickens and farming from his Puerto Rican grandfather, who visited his family often when he was growing up. His mother is Puerto Rican and his father is Cuban. As a military family, they moved often and lived in Hawaii, California, and North Carolina.

“My grandfather would visit us from Puerto Rico, and he built this giant turkey and chicken coop in our backyard. It looked like a house,” Toranzo said. “I helped him build it, handing him wood and nails and tools.” Toranzo’s mother was raised in Puerto Rico, where raising chickens in the backyard was normal as well as growing your own food, he said. “My mother always had a vegetable garden, and she always accepted my help with it,” he said.

As a young adult, he lived in Chicago to pursue a degree in medicine and met his wife there. When she was admitted to a physical therapy program at Tennessee State University, the couple moved to Tennessee, where he finished his degree in Biology.

“Nashville was where I purchased my first 16 chickens and brought them and a sawed in half chicken coop back to Chicago,” he said. The couple lived in Chicago for nine years, where he then became “The Chicken Man.” He and his wife bought a half-acre lot with help from an urban farm incubator program called Growing Power, now called Urban Growers Collective. His wife found the Chicago urban farming program and encouraged him to participate.

“It was a huge leap of faith,” said Toranzo, remembering ten incubators all over the living room before he could afford to build a chicken house, and keeping chickens in the basement and in the garage because of the brutal Chicago winters. Toranzo worked numerous jobs, including working on a medical surgical unit, caring for terminally ill people. He planned to go to medical school but then started getting interested in agriculture while making the connection between good health and good food. After workdays in Chicago, he loved returning each evening to his chickens and other animals.

Toranzo is now continuing his dream of teaching young people about farming and growing food. Tired of Chicago winters and needing more space for their animals, he and his wife saved and bought their current 20-acre farm in Southwest Georgia near his wife’s family.

Now they have more room for their 100 chickens, and 21 sheep, two horses, a donkey, named Butterbean, and four dogs.

“Many children from cities have never seen a chicken,” said Toranzo, who has already been hosting students and interns, including some from his former Chicago neighborhood. “Farms bring a lot of life to the community. And it’s not just overalls and a straw hat. There is a lot of business management to learn. I plan to mentor and guide young people, who want to learn how to farm and grow food for their families and communities.” Starting in March 2023, the farm, Osafa’s Oasis, will offer youth apprenticeships to teach hoophouse and chicken coop construction as well as care and processing of sheep, goats, and chickens. Toranzo will have two-week apprenticeships every month and month-long programs during the summer and will host up to 12-students at a time.

“We want to offer a family-like structure,” said Toranzo, adding that he is now building places for students to stay, including small houses, and already has Lotus Belle tents. The couple also plans to offer farm stays for people to experience rural life and learn more about farming and healthy food.

In addition to farming and hosting students, Toranzo builds 100-foot by 20-foot hoop houses and chicken coops for customers upon request and helps people hatch their flocks. Student apprentices will help with all these jobs, he said.

Some of his greatest challenges have included being patient with growth and building infrastructure, he said. For example, his sheep flock grew to 50 in a year when they were all pregnant and all had twins. Grass management challenged him as he headed into the winter in their first year. Coyotes took ten of his sheep, he said. The couple’s Great Pyrenees dog has helped with that challenge.

“There were no coyotes in Chicago,” he said. Toranzo’s greatest joy has been seeing his son, Osafa, age two, play on the farm. The farm is named after Osafa, which means “healing” in Nigerian. Toranzo said he loves seeing children grasp farming concepts and seeing people gain confidence to grow food and raise their own livestock.

“Farming is healing for families and for the community,” he said. “You add life.”

For more information on Osafa’s Oasis Farm and upcoming youth apprenticeship programs or farm stays, visit osafasoasis.com.