

# Stories of Engagement

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## Kaplan Fellow Addresses Food Insecurity

By Vanessa Okoyeh

All across Ithaca, food injustice abounds. From the financial inability to get healthy food items to the lack of transportation to markets and shops, the problem affects the most vulnerable members of the Ithaca population. The Kaplan Family Distinguished Faculty Fellowship in Service-Learning awarded annually by the Public Service Center recognizes the importance of greater involvement in civic engagement. The fellowship awards two faculty members who are having significant impacts at Cornell to help them further develop community-based projects, to initiate a new effort, or institutionalize a service-learning course. As one of the selected 2016 Kaplan Family Distinguished Faculty Fellows, Professor Noliwe Rooks, Interim Chair of the Africana Studies Department at Cornell, seeks to understand and address the structural issues surrounding food insecurity among Ithaca's senior citizens of color, including—but not limited to—the challenges created by limited incomes and age-related disabilities.

While working in the environmental justice field in Trenton, New Jersey, Professor Rooks first encountered the extent to which food justice affected economically disadvantaged communities of color. She described being prompted by a report outlining the health difficulties faced by members of the aforementioned communities who lived in houses still coated in lead paint.

"It was a little horrifying to me to think that we know there's basically what we would have to call a public health crisis going on in poor urban areas across the country that is well-known, well-documented and scientists are all in there showing you what's happening. And there's almost no response at a federal, state or local level. Almost none," said Professor Rooks.

Thereafter, the topic of health and the socioeconomic contexts in which health deteriorates or flourishes became more of an issue with which she wanted to get involved. Just prior to coming to Cornell, in fact, she had begun an ingredient replacement project in South Bronx that aimed to



Noliwe Rooks

observe the effects of the consumption of high-quality foods on low-income clientele.

Rooks' primary critique of programs targeted at reducing hunger is the fact that those programs fail to recognize the minimal access to food for those living on fixed incomes; the answer, she says, does not lie simply in building new health food stores or supporting your local farmers' market because of the high cost of the foods available at said stores. "If your primary income is food stamps or you're supplementing your food stamps with a minimum wage job...you can spend almost your entire month's allotment at the farmers' market."

In the future, Professor Rooks plans to continue promoting her message of addressing the structural issues surrounding the acquisition of healthy foods through continued outreach efforts and food justice-centered conferences. Another way to move forward, she says, is to bring more awareness to the food difficulties of low-income individuals. "Poor people work hard, and there's the thing, the work that you have to do to put any money in your pocket. In the extremities of poverty, the work that you have to do to just survive, what it takes for you to make sure that you have some place to lay your head, that you have some kind of transportation, that your kids have got shoes on their feet. It takes a hustle that middle class people rarely see...The extent to which we, as a society, are comfortable not noticing those folks, are comfortable celebrating kale and community gardens is part of the reason that you have to have a food justice movement."