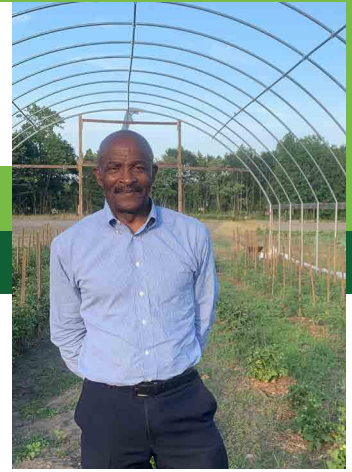




# Reverend Richard Joyner Conetoe Family Life Center



One of the Local Food Champions of 2019 by the NC Local Food Council.

In 2005, Reverend Richard Joyner was grappling with a weight on his conscious. He was presiding over more than 20 funerals each year in his congregation of 300 members at the Conetoe (“Kuh-neet-uh”) Baptist Church, without addressing the conspicuous health issues causing many of these premature deaths.

The predominantly African American community of rural Conetoe, North Carolina was facing high rates of unemployment, poverty, and obesity, as well as a lack of access to health care.

“People look for heroes to lead them out of this. We had to give up the hero model and say no one person [can fix this],” Joyner explains.

“We can grow more medicine through the plants than we can buy and there are no side effects,” explains Joyner.

In a grassroots response, Joyner helped to establish the Conetoe Family Life Center in 2007. The center’s mission is to improve the health of the community, and particularly children, by providing healthy foods, increasing physical activity and delivering health services.

The centerpiece of the program is a 25-acre property with a garden, nature trails, classroom space and a lay health worker on-site. The center supports more than 20 additional small gardens in the community through a youth grant program.

The center teaches math, reading, science and technology through practical farm applications, such as crop planning for the sliding scale Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program. In both the summer camp program, where 100 students bring home food to their families, and the 200 member CSA, participants are asked to chart health metrics including blood pressure and weight.

By 2014, metrics showed a decrease in emergency room visits, a reduction in health risk factors, and an increase in high school graduation rates.

“We want children to know that food sovereignty starts in your home. It starts in your community,” Joyner says.

The anecdotal evidence of the center’s success is also inspiring. Joyner shares the story of one child with attention deficient challenges whom he encouraged to “get out in the field and have fun.” The boy asked eagerly, “Can I take my shoes off?” and Joyner replied, “Yeah, pull your shoes off!” Joyner describes that the boy was soon jetting across the field barefoot and tasting raw vegetables. Over time at the center, he witnessed the boy’s emotional health improve along with his nutrition.

“We can grow more medicine through the plants than we can buy, and there are no side effects,” explains Joyner.

Joyner’s transformational work has been recognized nationally. In 2014, he received the Encore Purpose Prize and in 2015 he was named a Top 10 CNN Hero. In 2018, Joyner joined the City Council of Rocky Mount, North Carolina.

He tells a story of experienced Latino farmers who showed up to pick beans in the heat with his crew when he had given up on harvesting the crop.

Joyner’s relationship with growing food is complex. He spent much of his life feeling angry towards the land because of the racism and economic injustice he witnessed growing up as the son of a sharecropper. When he looks back now, his father’s words resonate with him, “They may take my money, but we will always eat and we will always have shelter.” It was true in their family. They kept animals and a garden and despite there being 17 children in the household, Joyner describes their meals as bountiful.

“We want children to know that food sovereignty starts in your home. It starts in your community,” Joyner says. “You don’t have to leave your community to get food.”

Joyner’s focus now is his concern that, “we’ve taken healing and sustainability out of the community and put it in the institution.” He believes institutions can give critical support, but that the community should provide their own solution-based leadership.

Joyner explains that this feels scary, but that his community has proven they can provide for each other in many ways. He shares experiences of large-scale farm neighbors with vastly different political views from his own who have lent a refrigerated truck or shared crops for the CSA at critical times. He tells a story of experienced Latino farmers who showed up to pick beans in the heat with his crew when he had given up on harvesting the crop.

Another program at the center celebrates the value of the wisdom of elders and of intergenerational bonds. Youth bring produce boxes to seniors, with whom they sit and talk. In many cases, the seniors know the children’s parents or grandparents. They provide counsel and positivity to the children, telling them that they will go on to do great things, as many youth in the program already have.

Joyner’s description of these interactions is true of many of the programs at the center. In his words, “These kids have gotten therapy and they didn’t leave their community.”

Learn more about NC Local Food Councils’ champions and their work at [nclocalfoodcouncil.org](http://nclocalfoodcouncil.org).

# Zucchini Bread or Muffins

## Ingredients:

- 1 c. all purpose flour
- 1 tsp. cinnamon
- 1 tsp. nutmeg
- 1 tsp. baking soda
- 1/2 tsp. baking powder
- 1/4 tsp. salt
- 1 tsp. vanilla
- 1 stick of butter
- 1 c. sugar
- 1 egg + 1 yolk
- 1 1/2 c. grated zucchini
- Nuts

*Reverend Richard Joyner shared his recipe for zucchini bread.*



Spray 2 loaf pans or muffin cups with cooking spray set aside while oven preheats at 375°.

I use a food processor to grate the zucchini, then I add all the wet ingredients. Blend for 1 minute, then add the dry ingredients and mix. Pour into pan and bake until done, about 20-25 minutes, if muffins. Loaves take longer. I use walnuts, but you may use nuts of your choice.