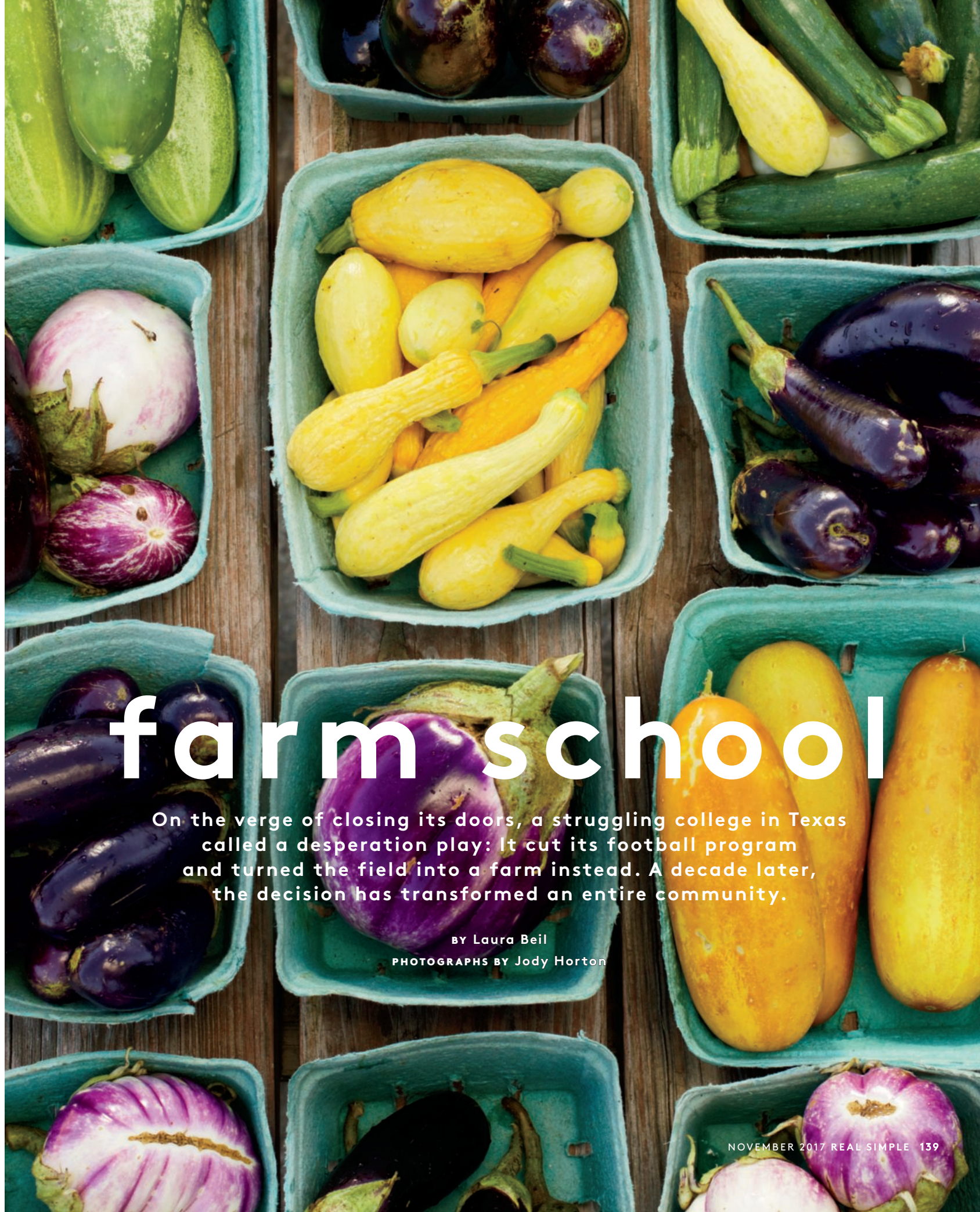




Farm director James Hunter with farmhands Darclea Houston and TiYanna Wright at WE Over Me farm. Opposite page: Trays of squash, eggplant, zucchini, and cucumbers at the farmers market.



farm school

On the verge of closing its doors, a struggling college in Texas called a desperation play: It cut its football program and turned the field into a farm instead. A decade later, the decision has transformed an entire community.

By Laura Beil
PHOTOGRAPHS BY Jody Horton



Clockwise from top left: WE Over Me's market; Wright sorts through a haul of peppers; Houston holds up a tomato; Wright and Houston pick peppers.

When Paul Quinn College was founded in 1872, it was the first institution of higher learning for African Americans west of the Mississippi River—a historic achievement. For more than a century, the school fostered a proud tradition. One graduate became a theater director and producer during the Harlem Renaissance, helping to launch the careers of black actors during the mid-20th century. Another alumnus was elected to the Texas legislature.

In 1990, the campus moved from its original location in Central Texas to Dallas and boasted 1,000 students. But the coming decade brought deterioration to both academics and fiscal stability. Income dried up. Enrollment plummeted (it would eventually drop to 151), and most students didn't graduate. Yet through it all, there was football. The Paul Quinn Tigers kept playing, and in 2002 the team finished with a rare winning record.

At its lowest point, in 2007, the college hired Michael Sorrell, a 40-year-old lawyer with no experience in higher education, to become its fifth president in five years. No one else wanted the job. "We were losing students left and right because, frankly, everybody thought the school wasn't going to make it," says Sorrell. When he arrived on campus, 13 buildings sat vacant, moldy, and crawling with mice. In his first week, he began slashing expenses, including the football program. Some alumni objected—no football? in Texas?—but it would save the school about \$1 million a year.

With no players and no games, the football field sat empty. Then one afternoon in the fall of 2009, Sorrell recalls, he had lunch with Trammell S. Crow, a Dallas philanthropist who would go on to found what is reportedly the country's largest Earth Day celebration. Sorrell lamented that the community around the school, like many lower-income neighborhoods, was a food desert with no grocery store for miles. Residents depended on convenience stores and fast food.

The conversation turned to whether there was a place on campus that could accommodate a garden. "I said, 'Absolutely! We could put it on the football field!'" says Sorrell.

From the moment the idea struck him, Sorrell realized that a farm could change Paul Quinn's entire narrative. Problem was,

the school didn't have an agriculture program. Staff members had never raised more than houseplants. The job of planting crops fell primarily to a faculty member with an economics degree; she started Googling. Sorrell remembers skeptics dismissing the effort as a publicity stunt. "All we had was a willingness to fail," he says. "And if we were going to fail, we were going to fail doing things that mattered to the people we cared about."

But this isn't a story of failure.

It was shortly after this time that Darciea Houston drove her ailing Ford Escort onto the campus to decide whether to enroll. She immediately wanted to turn around. She didn't like the sense of foreboding that came over her when her car lurched up the driveway and passed through the iron gate. But it had taken her more than an hour to make the trip across Dallas County, down side streets, nursing a vehicle that at the time couldn't top 35 miles an hour. She finally told herself, "Just go in. You came this far."

This was in 2012, and she had come far indeed. After growing up in the Midwest in the 1980s, she moved to Texas, where her father lived, shortly before her high school graduation. In the years that followed, she married young and started her own business while raising three children and attending community college. She planned to pursue a degree in nutrition at Texas Woman's University, about an hour and a half drive from her house in the Dallas suburbs. Then her car blew its timing belt.

Without the means to make repairs, she searched for colleges closer to home. Paul Quinn popped up on her screen. And then it dawned on her: She had once lived at the school's doorstep. In those years, she saw weedy grounds and buildings with broken windows and thought it was an abandoned apartment complex.

But on that first visit, Houston met a recent alumna working in the admissions office. "She had nothing but great things to say—and it wasn't something that she was just regurgitating," she recalls. "You could tell that she had experienced joy." What Houston did not know then was that the school was in the midst of a renewal.

From the time the first crops were planted until today, the school's fortunes have turned around. Annual deficits of \$1 million have turned into six- and seven-figure surpluses. Enrollment has climbed to more than 500 students, with a waiting list for still more. A new residence hall is scheduled to open in 2020—the first building renovation in decades. The crumbling structures are gone. And while there is a chapel on campus to nurture the soul, the farm, called WE Over Me, has become a spiritual anchor of another sort. For instance: In 2011, city officials proposed increasing the amount of garbage at a nearby landfill. Paul Quinn students, inspired to protect their campus and its neighborhood, rallied at city hall with signs reading GROCERIES NOT GARBAGE and WE ARE NOT TRASH, and eventually the garbage was sent elsewhere.

"If we were going to fail, we were going to fail doing things that mattered to the people we cared about."

—Michael Sorrell, president of Paul Quinn College

The farm has grown to include a 3,000-square-foot greenhouse, beehives, and about 60 different crops. The college hired farm director James Hunter in 2015. He arrived passionate about organic farming, community engagement, and working with students. “When I tell people this is my dream job, I’m not kidding,” he says.

Hunter plants not only traditional favorites, such as purple hull peas, radishes, and tomatoes, but also more exotic offerings, such as tetragonia (a New Zealand spinach) and poona kheera (succulent yellow cucumbers from India). About 10 percent of the harvest is donated to the local food bank. The rest is in demand from some of Dallas’s most notable chefs, including those at Wolfgang Puck’s Five Sixty.

The biggest customer is Legends Hospitality, the company that serves AT&T Stadium, where the Dallas Cowboys play. Sorrell likes to joke that the school has sent far more kale to the NFL than it ever did players. But it did send at least one player—sort of. George Wasai attended in the 1980s, when it was Bishop College, which later closed and became the site of Paul Quinn College when it moved to Dallas from Central Texas. He went on to become director of Legends’ food and beverage service. When he heard that vegetables were growing on the ground where he once kicked field goals, he drove down and offered to buy some of the produce. In the early days, he and his staff offered planting suggestions and even helped with some of the farm labor.

The stadium now receives about 12,000 to 15,000 pounds of produce each year from the WE Over Me farm; during football season, the chefs might call in a 100-pound order of greens every game day. “If you’re at the stadium, there’s a very good chance that the vegetables you are eating came from Paul Quinn,” says Wasai.

This past summer, Paul Quinn met a new milestone. The campus began hosting a farmers market every Thursday afternoon to make it easier for local residents to buy fresh produce. I arrived one day just as the booths were being set up and found Hunter unloading sacks of freshly picked squash and radishes and cartons of eggs from the chicken coop that now sits just past the end zone.

The farm gate now bears a picture of the new mascot, Spike the Touchdown Tomato. The bleachers were demolished to make room for the greenhouse, but the goalposts and scoreboard remain. At the old concession stand, a dry-erase board maps out the locations of crops. Each quadrant is referred to as a down. In the third down, rows of peppers shine in the afternoon sun.

Working at the market that day was TiYanna Wright, a senior psychology major from Los Angeles. She learned about Paul Quinn and the farm at a college fair. The farm wasn’t the sole reason she moved to Texas, but the idea of it made her curious. Growing up, she had rarely seen produce outside a grocery store or restaurant.

Wright took a farm job as her work-study choice, showing up on

her first day in the August heat wearing black sweatpants and long sleeves. Shortly thereafter, she stepped in a fire ant mound while pulling up old peavines and had to scramble to peel off her sock and shoe. Her bare foot landed in a bed of sharp sticker burrs. Not one to shy away from a challenge, Wright came back the next day, and the next. The more she worked, the more she realized that digging the dirt, pulling weeds, and watching plants grow brought her a sense of purpose and peace. Most days she leaves her cell phone behind. “You hear that?” she asked me, listening to the sound of birds, wind, and cicadas. “That’s what I love about this place.”

Sophomore Chandler Taylor-Henry came to Paul Quinn from Jackson, Mississippi, to major in business entrepreneurship, dreaming of owning a ranch one day. He walks to the farm nearly every afternoon to work. “It allows me to get away from class and the stresses of being a college student,” he says. “It’s meditation, basically. A lot of students come down just to clear their heads.”

Darciea Houston, who did enroll that day in 2012, also found her sanctuary among the plants. She grew up playing outside with cousins, and she has felt a connection to the outdoors her entire life. After graduating from Paul Quinn, she was offered a job in the admissions office. Given her approachability and Hollywood smile, she was good at the job. But she felt so smothered under the fluorescent lights, she would walk outside whenever she could. Finally, she left her office job to become lead farmhand as she pursues graduate studies in integrative health. “I can come out here and see every kind of bird,” she told me. “I’m finding spiders that are beautiful. I don’t even like spiders!”

Students seek her out when they have troubles. She’ll walk with them among the fragrant rows of plants and remind them of things that ground them: *Here, girl, smell this rosemary.* “I feel that I’ve been able to receive and give back because of people pouring into me here,” she says. She understands the joy she saw in the admissions office five years ago, because now it is hers.

Two years ago, the school expanded its mission and partnered with a charter school for elementary and middle school students on campus, Trinity Environmental Academy, to use the farm as a teaching tool. Clarice Criss, who lives nearby and operates smaller urban farms, has seen the children when she visits the campus to buy vegetables. “Watching their eyes light up as they touch a chicken for the first time—that’s something you don’t get to see every day, especially in an urban, low-income community,” she says.

Sorrell has an even bigger vision: that the farm might one day become self-supporting and include a restaurant. (“No one ever accuses me of swinging small,” he says.) Never mind whether anyone on campus has ever run a restaurant; they know that anything is possible as long as you’re willing to fail. “It’s difficult to overstate how important the farm is,” he says. “It has emotionally, intellectually, and physically helped transform our community.”



Clockwise from top left: Trays of tomatoes; Houston holds one of the farm’s chickens; just-picked peppers; Hunter carries produce on the farm.