

Dignity and Joy - Season 2, Episode 1

In my backyard: Urban hens, community food and learning as you grow with Ohemaa Boateng

S2E1 keywords: urban chickens, backyard gardening, community, land, children, youth, connection to land, community food, learning, growth, Toronto, Jane and Finch, farm.

Listen to season 2, episode 1 [here](#).

S2E1 transcript:

Sheldomar Elliott: Hey there podcast listeners. We're back with more Dignity and Joy. And on this special episode, we actually recorded the interview live at FoodShare's annual general meeting. It made for an exciting chat and a little bit of a shorter one than usual. A warning, because we recorded this one in the wild world of Zoom, rather than our usual virtual studio, the sound quality might be a little off, but we hope that doesn't stop you from enjoying the episode. Today, our guest is the one and only, Ohemaa Boateng. Welcome Ohemaa.

Ohemaa Boateng: Thanks, Sheldomar, for having me on the pod. I'm so excited to be here.

Sheldomar Elliott: Of course, it's my pleasure and thank you for taking some time. So, I know a little bit about you Ohemaa, but for those who don't, Ohemaa is a long-time resident in the Jane and Finch community. Who has been a leading organizer for urban agriculture, social justice, food security, and food sovereignty in Toronto. Ohemaa started her journey into food justice work at the Black Creek Community Farm as a farm staff, spearheading the farm school program, coordinating family and children activities, and leading the weekly farmers markets. Today, she's a farm executive director. In between those roles, Ohemaa has been involved in a wide range of projects and initiatives that link community with food, in particular through urban agriculture. So, I'm so excited to be chatting with you today, Ohemaa, although we have a little bit of time compared to the typical episode. But there's a lot of things I want to jump into, but as I like to do on the pod, I want to start with the most important questions I could ask anybody. So, obviously, they're about food. Are you up for some icebreakers?

Ohemaa Boateng: Definitely, definitely.



Sheldomar Elliott: OK. That sounds good. The one I really appreciate is, if you had one meal every day for the rest of your life, what would that be?

Ohemaa Boateng: OK, that's a good one. Oh, that's a toss up. But if it was every day, it would be rice and peas slathered in some ox tail stew with a side of coleslaw, a glass of cucumber water and some mangos as dessert. You have to have some dessert.

Sheldomar Elliott: Yeah, shout out to the Jamaicans in the group, we have some ox tail on the table. I love that. I love that. Maybe the next one, still food related, but if you were a kitchen utensil, which would you be?

Ohemaa Boateng: These are good questions. I would be a whisk. For two reasons, one would be because I love making pancakes, bread, muffins, and I tend to use that utensil. The second reason is because it's an opportunity to bring all different ingredients and flavors together and with the whisk, you kind of mix it all up, so.

Sheldomar Elliott: Wow, how wholesome is that. I love that answer, thank you for sharing. Well, obviously I could talk about this kind of stuff all day, but let's get into things a little bit more. So, I am a bit familiar with your origin story. And shout out to you being the executive director at BCCF, I think that's incredible. As folks may already know, we had the amazing Leticia, also Ama, Deawuo, executive director there. And then Bibiana stepped in from FoodShare as an interim ED for a little bit, but now it's you. And I think that's incredible, but perhaps, paint us a story or speak to a little bit around how you became engaged in food security and food sovereignty work and maybe your experiences as a backyard farmer.

Ohemaa Boateng: Awesome, OK. I have to take it way back, because this was a personal journey for me. Before getting into food justice, I had to have my own awakening. I was pregnant with my son at the time, back in 2011. And I was questioning myself on a lot of the products I've been using personally. At the time I was perming my hair, and a lot of black girls and woman know about this, we tend to go through this phase where we perm our hair. And I was questioning, why am I doing this? Especially when I became more conscious of how I was caring for my body now that I'm caring a life inside of me. So, I decided to go natural. And pay more attention to the food I eat, what I'm consuming, what I'm putting on my skin, what I'm putting in my body. And my mom gave me this really profound idea. It's very simple, but profound for me. Was like, if you wouldn't eat it, why would you put it on your skin. And so, it made me

be more aware of the things I'm consuming, where is coming from. And so, I started growing my own food and my little apartment. I started growing lettuce after doing some research on what does well when you have a balcony, and some tomatoes and they did really well. And the minute I got a backyard, I went full throttle, started growing things like cucumbers, tomatoes, lettuce, corn, so many different vegetables to the point where I'm even raising chickens, right? That was a gradual process of me doing that in

my backyard, but it was actually the former ED of Black Creek Community Farm, Leticia – Ama – who made me come aware that there was even a farm at Jane and Finch. I had no idea. I didn't even believe her, so she actually had to take me to the farm to show me the space and I couldn't believe that being a long-time resident in the community, I had no idea that there was a farm nearby. So, I think that year I applied to be a summer inter and got in, met some amazing elders and mentors, like Damien and Jackie and Noelle. And met farmers like Alex, Amy, Conner, amazing people like just a great group of people to learn from. And it just fed my need to be more connected to land, know where your food comes from, and so, that knowledge of working at the farm, being more involved in the community, already having a passion for food and community

and working with children, I end up getting an opportunity with Green Thumbs Growing Kids, a non-profit organization. And started teaching kids about how to grow their food in their school gardens. Having them build that connection to the land and the different types of food that can grow in our environment in Canada. And it was so exciting, you learn so much, especially when you work with children. And to have it all come full circle, where I'm back in my community, now serving as an ED is truly a blessing. A huge opportunity, because I feel as if a lot of the little moments have built up to this where I can now share what I've learned to my community.

Sheldomar Elliott: Absolutely. Thank you for all of that. And I know you, you threw chickens in there really quickly and I want to come back to that really badly. But I think it's so incredible and quite empowering for you to like take that on yourself, your own health journey and then that sort of translated into work that you do for your community and then even beyond. And I know you touched on the work that you do with Green Thumbs and young children and having children of your own, which I also want to get back to around the chickens, but like what has that experience been with working with young children and maybe some of the lessons you've learned along the way of working with youth.

Ohemaa Boateng: Well, fun fact, after my internship with the farm, I started a business called Baby Steps, where I was providing childcare to, for meetings and conferences, like a mobile childcare business. And that actually allowed me to still stay connected to the farm because you know, there onsite we were having a lot of meetings, food justice meetings and advocacy and you know, a lot of residents needed childcare in order to be able to attend that. So, I'm so thankful to even be able to serve in that capacity. And part of that work, providing that childcare, having kids make that connection, and then working with Green Thumbs, you learn so much and you realize that there's a huge disconnect for kids in the city and learning where their food comes from. You know, a lot of us, we come from immigrant parents, for me, I'm an immigrant. And you realize that, especially for, in my case for my parents, they grew up on the farm. They know the farmers who was growing the food. They had a relationship with the land. And when you come to the city, sometimes you lose all of that. And when I was working with the children and teaching them and having them explore the garden, you realize that they forget that the food grows in soil, or not everything grows on trees, right? Like I had a, one of the kids think carrots grow on trees. That was really interesting. Really interesting thought, but it's that disconnect, right? And

then even with some adults, when I had my chickens in my backyard, a lot of people did not know that you don't need rooster to have an egg, right? So, even just knowing where your eggs come from sometimes, there's a disconnect, right? And so, yeah just working with children you get to see things from their perspective, but you also realize that if there's no real intent put behind having the children be outdoors, be able to freely explore the space, engage with food. Be able to pick food confidently, forage for their food or be familiar with the different plant species or edible, what we call weeds, edible weeds in the community and have that connection to land, then there will be a disconnect and I found that that was the case for a lot of the kids I was working with.

Sheldomar Elliott: I really resonate with all of that. I mean, I have a similar, not situation, but I mean, I grew up with my grandmother, who's an immigrant from Portugal and she had a small garden in her backyards, downtown Toronto. And was growing tomatoes and lettuce and grapes from like the earliest memories I have. And I recall those experiences really being the foundation for the work I'm doing now and my general interest around the world. But it's really real that there's a disconnect amongst young people and folks generally from land and food. I know my younger siblings now who grew up in the city, don't have that connection to land. They always question me like, what do you do for work? When I tell them what I do for work, they're like do you even get paid for that? Like why do you care about that? So, there's, yeah, there's definitely a lack of knowing there, but it's amazing that folks like yourself are helping to education youth and take them along that journey. And knowledge is power, so yeah that's amazing. Well, I need to get back to chickens. We have to talk about the chickens of course, that's why you're here. Just joking. I know you touched on raising chickens in your backyard, is that correct?

Ohemaa Boateng: Yes. Yes, so I had my chickens for three years, raising them in the backyard from eggs. So, the kids and I did an experiment. We built our own incubator, went and collect the eggs from a farm, and incubated the chickens for 21 days. So, my kids actually got a chance to see, from an egg to a hen, what that life process is. And I feel like that process is so important, especially when you really want to understand where your food comes from, right? And having that compassion towards animals and having that relationship with your food, right? And so, I know for my neighbors, they were definitely like what is going on with, what is she doing now? Because every year I would be doing something new in the garden. And it's always like a, something that they'll be intrigued by, right? Like my neighbors gave me the title farmer of the year for a couple of years straight. Because of the things I was doing. But yeah so, I have the chickens in the backyard and it's so important because, especially when we think about what we went through and what we're currently going through with this pandemic. And shelves are going empty and there's a lot of uncertainty about the future and where our food is coming from. I was blessed enough to have a backyard that could accommodate chickens, one. But to go out into the garden when there was a lot of scarcity in the grocery store, go out, pick fresh produce, pick strawberries and cucumbers and lettuce. And have my kids collect the eggs. And I

make sure my kids are very involved in the whole process. So, that they have that relationship and the great thing about that was, it was also communal. A lot of the eggs that I collected, I shared with my neighbors. It definitely brought a lot of stories out where the aunties in the community would tell me about how the chickens, roaming around, like allow them to kind of reminisce of how things were back home. And just hearing the sounds of the chicken was very comforting for them and nostalgic. And even got to a point where the aunties would intentionally leave treats in their backyard to get the chickens to come visit them. And they would and they would go, hop over to their fence, snack on those treats that was laid out for them, and they'd come right back home, right? Which was great, so there was a beautiful relationship that was created all because I decided to have chickens in my backyard.

Sheldomar Elliott: And I have follow-up question, actually I have two. One, what were the names, if they had any? I have to know. We have to know.

Ohemaa Boateng: They definitely had names. I will tell you them, but you can't laugh, OK?

Sheldomar Elliott: I'll keep a straight face.

Ohemaa Boateng: So, one of them, so I'll just give a little context. So, I had two easter eggers that laid, they're like this golden-brown chickens. They laid like a teal-colored egg. And if you follow me on Instagram, you'll see that color. You can also search it online, which is pretty cool. So, there was like some hesitancy from my neighbors to try it until they actually did and they could tell the difference from having backyard chicken eggs and eggs from the grocery store, for example, right? Those two, they were named Marshmallow and Chickaletta.

Sheldomar Elliott: Of course they were.

Ohemaa Boateng: And for those parents with young kids, if they watch PAW Patrol, they will know where that name comes from because the mayor of the town had a, carried a chicken in her purse everywhere she went and that chicken was named Chickaletta. And then I had a beautiful Black Australorp chicken that was all black with tints of like a green shimmer in the sun. So, that chicken was called Midnight. So, it was a beautiful thing to have those chickens and to be able to raise chickens for the farm during that time, like with our incubator, we were able to hatch some chickens for Black Creek Community Farm during the pandemic, which was an amazing thing too.

Sheldomar Elliott: Yeah that's incredible to me and it, I love when children especially get to connect with animals that are not necessarily domestic, like cats and dogs. Yeah, it's just so special. First off, great names. I didn't laugh once and I'm happy to hear that your kids were

involved in that whole process. And I'm looking at the time, but I do have another kind of point I want to get to. Speaking of Instagram, I saw you were in Ghana not too long ago, right?

Ohemaa Boateng: Yeah, yeah.

Sheldomar Elliott: What were, what's up in Ghana? What are you doing over there?

Ohemaa Boateng: Good question, I see you're doing some investigation. So, I was able to acquire some land back home in my hometown, which I'm so so excited about, to start a farm. I was able to get the land ready and we're getting started. I'm going to be starting a poultry farm, so it's something I'm really really excited about. And really my goal is to have free range chickens that are able to just eat off the land and just have a little bit more, incorporate more ethical practices in the way that we raise our chickens. So, I'm super super excited about that and yeah, yeah. You did some research.

Sheldomar Elliott: Well, of course I, we had to pick you up on that. First off, congratulations. That is incredible. Like just to know that you're essentially continuing your food sovereignty work over on the continent. I think that's amazing, and I can only imagine there will be tons of Marshmallows and Chickalettas and Midnights running all over the place. So, yeah that, that is amazing. Is that something that you envisioned your kids being a part of when they're older or somehow be connected to the work that's happening in Ghana?

Ohemaa Boateng: You know, if that's something that they're interested in, I would definitely support it. My goal was really just to create opportunities for the people in my village. And you know, right now times are really hard, especially during the pandemic with the rising food costs and the cost of living has gone up. So, having this farm will definitely bring jobs and opportunities for people that didn't have that prior to. Sheldomar Elliott: Yeah, and I'm curious, what are some of the stuff that you hope to grow?

Ohemaa Boateng: Yeah, so there's, currently we're just building the poultry farm. I have additional land where, that has been cover cropped. By the end, closer to fall, we'll be planting cassava, tomatoes, plantain, mangos, just one thing you got to know about me is I love mangos.

Sheldomar Elliott: Oh, well it was your dessert of choice, right? Forever and ever.

Ohemaa Boateng: Right, right. So, just having a space where there can be food that's successful for people to freely pick, that's really important. And just having those staples available. But that's something that's in the works right now.

Sheldomar Elliott: I can't wait for that. I have been to Ghana once and I cannot wait to come back. So, fingers crossed when the time is right, I'd love to visit Kumasi, right? Is that where it's at?

Ohemaa Boateng: Yes, yes. Definitely come through. I'm going to put you to work though.

Sheldomar Elliott: Oh. No problem, of course. I was waiting for that part. Well, I'm looking at the time here, Ohemaa, I know we've met a few times before this, but I feel like I've learned so much about you and what motivates you to do your work today. Thank you so much for this conversation.

Ohemaa Boateng: You're very very welcome.

Sheldomar Elliott: If folks want to get in touch with you, where can reach you?

Ohemaa Boateng: Yes, so I am on Instagram, so you can definitely follow me @OhemaaBackyard, but I would also like to shout out the farm, Black Creek Community Farm, which is 4929 James Street. We do have a few events coming up that I'm excited about. This week is going to be our first harvest share pick up on Thursday, so those who've already registered for it will be getting their first bag of produce. We also have a pizza night coming up, June 18th . So, you can definitely join us for a casual evening, if you're into freshly baked pizza made in our brick oven and prepared by the awesome Chef Bashir. We have our Thursday farmers markets coming soon and starting July 2nd , we will have our pop-up farmers markets right at the corner of Jane and Finch. Something that we've done in the past and I'm so excited to be able to have this up and running again. And building back relationship with the neighboring grocery stores. And yeah, we'll be selling fresh produce, supporting black food vendors. You'll see them on site and local artists. And finally, if I can squeeze this in there, we have our annual farm festival. It's actually our tenth annual farm festival and it's a free event. A great wholesome family event and for the family, for the community, and for the supporters of the farm. There will be delicious food, activities for the kids, and many workshops that you can participate in. And an opportunity to purchase fresh organic produce at the farm. So, definitely check us out on our social media and on our website for more information.

Sheldomar Elliott: That's amazing. You heard her here first, folks. There's lot coming up, so stay plugged in that way. Again, thank you Ohemaa. That's it for this live episode recording of Food Shares annual general meeting. Dignity and Joy is a podcast from FoodShare Toronto. We're a food justice organization advocating for the right to food and working to challenge the systemic barriers that keep people from accessing the food they need to thrive. You can learn more about our work at FoodShare.net. Support this episode comes from Hain Celestial Canada, if you have feedback on the pod, we'd love to hear from you. You can send us an email at Info@FoodShare.net or on our social media we're @FoodShareTO on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and on Instagram. Dignity and Joy is produced in collaboration with Lead Podcasting with sound engineering and editing by Michael Allen. The production team at FoodShare is Renee D'Souza and Andrea Thompson. Special thanks to Amanda Cupido. Thank you so much for listening.