

# THE HOOD FARMER JOURNEY

By Kimball Cartwright and Kae Vargas



Robert's success story with CT FarmLink traces back to his role as an AmeriCorps volunteer supervisor in Memphis. Since then, he has held positions at Green Village Initiative in Bridgeport and Gotham Greens in New York City, among others. And focusing his work on youth development and education, consistently honing his farming skills and refining his vision for a career as a farmer.

During a recent meeting with Robert in September, accompanied by Kae Vargas, CFT's Farmland Access Coordinator, we had the opportunity to learn about his remarkable journey.

Robert was able to use most of the services CT FarmLink offers to launch his farming venture in Wilton. At a networking event organized by CFT, UConn Extension, Land for Good, and other FarmLink partners in 2022, Robert connected with a farmland owner who sought an organic farmer. It was a perfect match. However, the journey was far from over.

Robert elaborated: "Kip Kolesinskas, CT FarmLink's consulting soil scientist, conducted a land assessment to determine what I could grow in those soils. Then, I collaborated with Will O'Meara from Land for Good to draft a lease. Finally, I sought legal services from the Legal Food Hub, a project of the Conservation Law Foundation, to address lease-related matters, and I was able to sign the lease in May."

Kae reports there are currently hundreds of young and aspiring farmers like Robert in Connecticut who are actively searching for farmland through the CT FarmLink program. The program is funded with lead financial support from the State of Connecticut, and generous contributions from CFT donors. CT FarmLink in collaboration with various agricultural-focused organizations, help ensure these beginning farmers will shape the future of agriculture in Connecticut.

In 2023, Robert is fully immersed in his mission, dedicating a substantial portion of his time to educating communities in Hartford, New Haven, and Bridgeport about agriculture. He skillfully balances these educational activities with the responsibility of farming an acre of land he recently leased in Wilton, CT. According to Kae, it's common for new farmers to lead busy lives with multiple jobs, and CT FarmLink, along with its network of partners, is designed to provide them with the necessary support in navigating the complexities of securing farmland.

For Robert, farming isn't just about achieving self-sustainability. He envisions locally produced food to address the issue of "food apartheid" – the profound racial and economic disparities in access to quality food and nutrition. Reflecting on his experiences in Memphis and Tallahassee, where he noticed similarities to his hometown of Bridgeport, Robert's sense of purpose has grown: "I want to build bridges between the local community and farms."

Robert's journey from Memphis to Bridgeport and beyond is a testament to the resilience and determination of young farmers. His dedication to sustainable agriculture and bridging communities exemplifies the future of farming in the state and how CT FarmLink plays a vital role in assisting these farmers in their journey to find land and resources to start their farm operations.

If you want to learn more about Robert's work, you can follow him on his personal Instagram @hoodfarmerrob and business Instagram @hempmilkhoney. Or attend his Mushroom educational workshop at Common Ground's Farm and Garden Conference in New Haven on November 11th.