

The Second-Chance Apiary

In the void Sears left when it fled North Lawndale, a group of ex-cons is harvesting high-quality sweet stuff.

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Renaldo Chatman was released from Stateville on Christmas Eve after serving 18 years for robbery. He was given a bus ticket and told he had 24 hours to check in with his parole officer. His brother in Chicago took him in, but outside the wall it was tough to get on his feet. "For 18 years all my bills and meals was paid by the state, and I was basically told when to sleep," he says. "So I had no responsibility." He had no luck finding work. "Doors get slammed in your face. On the application they ask you if you're an ex-offender, and if you say yeah that's the end of the interview."

But for the last two and half months Chatman's been working steadily in a weedy lot in North Lawndale, helping to tend 35 white pinewood boxes teeming with over a million busy honeybees. By late August the hives had produced more than a ton of a clear, light, all-natural honey that Chatman and his coworkers have been selling at the Oak Park and Lincoln Park farmers' markets under the brand name Beeline. It's also being used at fancy-pants eateries like Lula Cafe and NoMi. Blackbird superchef Paul Kahan has plans to put in an order, as does I.C.Y. Vegetarian, one of the few nonfranchise restaurants in North Lawndale.

Chatman is one of six ex-offender employees in a North Lawndale Employment Network transitional jobs program called Sweet Beginnings. NLEN is a five-year-old nonprofit organization dedicated to finding work for community residents. Its apiary sits behind a cement wall and chain-link gate on Fillmore in the shadow of the original 14-story Sears tower, where the company once had its headquarters. The Sears campus was a huge employment hub for North Lawndale up to the mid-70s, and the lot where the hives stand served as the company's loading docks. "Sears moving out of here helped create the disinvestment and desolation you see right now," says NLEN's Tom Wetzal, who manages sales and marketing of the honey. According to NLEN, North Lawndale's population dropped from 125,000 at its peak in 1960 to 41,768 in 2000. The 2000 census reported that 26 percent of those people are unemployed, compared to a citywide 6 percent. Fifty-seven percent of all adults in the community have either served time or spent time on parole or probation.

NLEN's flagship training program, U-Turn Permitted, puts ex-offenders, many of them recovering substance abusers, through a four-week course in cognitive-based work readiness, then matches them with employers who are willing to give them a chance. It's strict: four months ago, when Chatman showed up ten minutes late for his first day in the program, he was sent home and told to try again in two weeks.

"We recognize that there is this madness mentality that gets you in trouble and there's a certain type of madness that you need in order to cope and live successfully behind the wall," says NLEN executive director Brenda Palms Barber. "But you need a different set of coping skills out here. If you show up on time for our programming, we think you're gonna show up on time. If you don't, how can we have confidence in your ability?" The following month Chatman made it on time. He went through four weeks of anger management, cultural adjustment coaching, and

conflict resolution training as well as honing his job-search skills. Upon graduating he was placed with an organic farming project on the south side. "They give you a reason for getting up," Chatman says. "I've had to be up every day at eight o'clock, be there, or be terminated from their program."

Last summer Palms Barber and a board member were brainstorming ideas for job opportunities for their clients when the woman mentioned that she had a friend who was a beekeeper. Why not start a honey cooperative and hire NLEN clients to work the hives? The idea bounced around and slowly gathered momentum. Word got out to Stephanie Averill and Michael Thompson, the beekeepers who tend the apiary on the roof of City Hall. In April the state Department of Corrections gave NLEN a \$124,000 grant to develop a business plan for Sweet Beginnings. Since then funding and volunteers have come from many quarters.

"The thing about it is, there's two cultures that have come together--urban agriculture and workforce development," says Palms Barber. "And there is an art and science to both, but I think there's much more art to beekeeping than science. There're just a lot of things that we can't control about what the bees do, what they produce, and how long they'll produce. Farming is not placing x number of people in x number of jobs. But we can sort of make some projections." NLEN and the beekeepers roughed out a three-year plan in which they hoped to employ ten people and to expand to 300 hives.

Thompson, the "kahuna of Chicago beekeepers" according to Palms Barber, has been keeping hives since he was 11. In the 70s his honey won a blue ribbon at the Illinois State Fair. "If you want to be a beekeeper," he says, "you have to think about it really hard in the fall because you have to plan in the winter for it." In January he ordered material to build 40 hives, and when it arrived he and the first three NLEN clients set about assembling and painting the hive bodies and "supers"--boxes that hold up to 11 wax-coated frames on which bees build honeycomb. In April the bees and their 40 queens arrived from northern California.

"You install them on a really nice day," says Thompson, "and then it all happens really fast." The bees are fed on sugar water for a few weeks. Then, hopefully, the queen mates with a drone and begins laying eggs while the worker bees start foraging for nectar on the early spring blooms. As the bottom bodies fill up with brood cells and honey, the beekeepers stack supers on top of the brood boxes, from which the honey that the bees don't need for the winter is harvested.

Urban bees are said to be more productive and make tastier honey than their country cousins because there's a greater abundance and variety of nectar sources in the city and they travel shorter distances for it. NLEN's apiary is located midway between Garfield and Douglas parks, but the bees have plenty of white sweet clover and aster to plunder right in the lot and along the railroad tracks that run along its north side. The current owner has donated the use of the lot to NLEN for two years, and the city's offered the group three nearby vacant lots for the program to expand into.

Since the program is so new NLEN is still figuring out what sort of person makes a good beekeeper. It's hard, dirty work, and ideally clients should enjoy being outdoors and working with their hands. Some aren't ready for that. The project lost one of its first clients, Palms Barber

says, because he didn't want to get his shoes dirty. Clients shouldn't be allergic to bees either: there's a chance of getting stung, and though it's slim it scares some people off. "There was a guy that interviewed, and during his interview he got stung," says Palms Barber. "He was offered the job but he didn't come back. I think that the bees rejected him."

"That was such a freak thing," says Wetzel. "He wasn't even near the bees, so we don't know why that happened."

"It may not have been one of our bees, honestly," Palms Barber says.

In fact honeybees don't bother much with humans unless they feel threatened or are otherwise prevented from the prime directive of making honey. Chatman says he was initially reluctant to get involved because he was scared of bees. He's been stung four times, but "that was my mistake," he says. "You gotta be easy with them."

"I always say in order to get the bees' attention to hurt you, you have to kick a hive," says Thompson. Earlier this summer someone began sneaking into the apiary through a gap in the gate and doing just that. The beekeepers started finding broken bottles on the lot, and eventually a number of hives were knocked over. "It may have killed a queen or two," says Thompson. "Some of the equipment got damaged, but not very badly. I hope no one got hurt when they were doing it." Since then neighbors and the police have begun keeping an eye out, and after more chains were added to the gate the vandalism stopped.

While the quiet, isolated lot may invite such shenanigans, it also attracts wildlife. On a sunny day last month just after the cold snap, a falcon called out from atop a streetlight overlooking the apiary. Bees were streaking in and out of the hives, preoccupied with taking advantage of the season's second clover bloom.

Gwenn Carter, a friend of Thompson's, and Calvin Mitchell, another NLEN client, were getting set to harvest some honey. Mitchell had spent eight months in Cook County Jail for possession with intent to deliver cocaine, but now he works six days a week tending the hives and selling the honey at market. He says working outdoors agrees with him. Using a small metal can filled with smoldering newspaper, he puffed smoke down into the hives to calm the bees, then loosened the frames inside the super with a metal tool. He carefully lifted each frame and handed it over to Carter, who brushed the more tenacious insects back down into the hive. "All they really want to do is work," she said. She handed the frame to Thompson, who ran it over to his truck and inserted it into another super sitting in the bed. Each frame holds about three and a half pounds of honey. Later they'd head over to a volunteer's house, place the frames in an extractor, then strain and bottle it. In about an hour they'd harvested around 80 pounds to sell at the Oak Park farmers' market that Saturday.

Mitchell makes \$8 an hour with no benefits, but he says he's added the experience to his resume in the hope of landing a better job. NLEN has big plans too. Carter is making beeswax candles, and Thompson's colleague Stephanie Averill is developing products like honey-based lotions, scrubs, and lip balm. Next season, in response to customer demand, Beeline will sell pollen at the markets.

Some things have come full circle. Gerald Mitchell, an employee of Thompson's who pitches in with the Sweet Beginnings crew, grew up in the neighborhood and in the 60s worked in shipping and receiving at the old Sears warehouse on the lot where the bees work now. "There was a neighbor that walked by and he was like, 'I can't believe it's taken 30 years for them to finally do something with this lot,'" says Palms Barber.

NLEN's annual membership meeting, which is open to the public, is Wednesday, September 15, from 9:30 to noon at the Sinai Community Institute, 2653 W. Ogden, town halls B and C. There will be an awards presentation for clients, tours of the apiary, and I.C.Y. Vegetarian muffins made with Beeline honey. Call 773-638-1825.