

PROSPERITY FORUM

Speaker Biographies



Sharlene Brown

Cofounder

With a background in economics and an MBA, Sharlene has dedicated nearly a decade to helping clients in underserved communities build resilient financial foundations. Her expertise lies at the intersection of financial inclusion, economic empowerment, and agricultural development in emerging markets. Spending part of her early childhood on a family farm in Jamaica sparked her lifelong appreciation for what agricultural livelihoods require—and the unique financial vulnerabilities that farmers face.



Matt Blackburn

Business Development Manager

Matt serves in business development at Amber Farmland Investments. He views organic nutrition as integral to his health and sees his role as an opportunity to expand organic farmland availability through Amber's mission to transition chemical-dependent farmland to USDA-certified organic.

Prior to joining Amber, Matt served in business development for LaSalle Investment Management, facilitating tax-deferred exchanges of real estate and farmland. Matt received an MBA in Finance from DePaul University and a Bachelor of Science in Finance from Northern Illinois University. He is a CAIA® charterholder.



De'Erricka Green

Heirs' Property Law Fellow

De'Erricka Green is a North Carolina attorney whose experience spans estate planning and administration, tax research, and heirs' property law. She serves as Law Fellow and Co-Director of the Heirs' Property Project within Wake Forest University School of Law's Environmental Law and Policy Clinic, where she supervises clinical law students handling real client matters involving estate planning, property ownership, and family land preservation.

Her background informs her practical approach to helping families understand how legal documents, ownership arrangements, and tax considerations work together to support effective succession planning. Her current work emphasizes preventing and resolving heirs' property issues, preserving family land, and expanding access to legal assistance for landowners who cannot otherwise afford representation.

Green brings a perspective grounded in both direct client service and training the next generation of attorneys to help families navigate complex ownership and inheritance issues. She earned her J.D., cum laude, from North Carolina Central University School of Law and her B.A. in English and Africana Studies from North Carolina State University.



Rashida Harris

Category Manager

Rashida Harris is a Category Manager with nearly 20 years of experience at a large national retailer, including 8 years buying produce. Starting on the store floor and advancing through merchandising and buying, she has built direct relationships with growers and vendors and guided them through what it takes to become a retail partner, from first conversation to first shipment.

Rashida also serves on the Industry Advisory Board for the Management Program at Wentworth Institute of Technology and is clerk for the Camala Foundation.





Edgar Hayes

Community Farmer

Edgar is one of Freedom Farm's co-founders. He loves the farming aspect of all the many tasks that need to be done. "I can do this all day." I think he coined that phrase before Captain America, if you ask me. Edgar loves re-connecting with creation. He spends lots of his time outdoors listening to the birds singing, growing food, homesteading, cutting the grass, watching and feeling the life around him, and hugging trees. Yes, he is a tree hugger! He loves making his own granola, too. :)



Michelle Hiron

Founder & CEO, HigherRing

Michelle is the founder & CEO of HigherRing, a B Corp and 1% for the Planet member specializing in managed back-office support for impact businesses and nonprofits, focused on fractional and managed financial and administrative operations. Her team's financial operations work includes supporting small- to medium-sized agricultural producers, ensuring they have solid financial solutions, and training them to capture and report their numbers each month so they have real financial clarity to make decisions. Michelle has over 25 years of experience in big retail and start-ups and is closely involved with all of HigherRing's client engagements, collaborating with each on best practices for processes and systems. She is passionate about using business as a force for good and advocates for sustainable labor and climate solutions with elected officials in the 22 states where HigherRing hires. She is the current Engagement Chair of B Local Bay Area, is the proud mama of two kids and one friendly pup, and loves hiking through beautiful Northern California and Oregon wildlands in her free time.





Lori Hylton

Cofounder

Lori brings a background in affordable housing, economic development, and community resilience to her work. Having served as a Food Justice Fellow with the PCUSA Hunger Program and managed the Kingston Farmers Market, she has spent years working alongside farmers who feed our communities. Lori has seen firsthand the tight margins and financial pressures agricultural life demands. Today, she combines her roots in food justice with practical coaching to help farmers build the financial capacity they need to navigate agriculture's unique challenges.



Brenden Kelly

Produce Manager

Brendan Kelly was born and raised in upstate New York. He attended CBA, class of '04, HVCC, class of '07, and then moved to Philadelphia where he studied literature and education at LaSalle University and received his bachelors in 2010. Thereafter he returned to Albany and began teaching at LaSalle School for Boys. In July 2013 Honest Weight Food Co-op opened its doors at its newest location on Watervliet Ave and Brendan started his produce career as Receiver. One year later he became the Produce Assistant Manager, and then in 2015 the Department Manager where he's helped shepherd the department from 4.5M to 6.2M in annual sales over the past decade. Brendan has also served as Store Operations Manager, a City Carrier for USPS, a handyman for the Westwood Motel, a clerk for Price Chopper, and a berry picker for Oronacah Farm. His hobbies include DJ'ing for local clubs, taking care of his two tuxedo cats, and bicycling.





Loretta Keller

Chef & Restaurateur

Loretta Keller is a San Francisco chef known for seasonal, ingredient driven California cooking. After cooking at Stars, she opened Bizou at Fourth and Brannan in 1993, later reinventing the space as COCO500 – a California/Mediterranean spot known for its fried green beans, braised beef chucks, and truffled flatbread. She was a James Beard semifinalist for Best Chef: Pacific in 2010 and 2012.

In 2014 Keller and her partner Clay Reynolds shifted their attention to creating the food and beverage program, at the Exploratorium and SF Conservatory of music, designing spaces and menus for these high volume venues.



Christine Rico

Founder & Consulting CFO

Christine Rico is a fractional CFO for mission-driven companies and the founder of CFO on Speeddial, which she built to give growing businesses the forward-looking financial strategy that usually only large companies can afford. She knows the food industry from the inside — serving as CFO to companies across farming, food access, CPG, wholesale and retail bakery, and multi-location cafés. A defining part of her work is helping food and farming businesses raise the right capital that fits their mission without giving up control or suffering with predatory loans. A past co-chair of Slow Money NYC and an active member of the Innovative Finance Initiative, Christine helps founders speak both the language of food and the language of money.





Will Summers

Community Farmer

Will Summers has been farming for nearly 20 years in a variety of small-scale vegetable growing operations practicing organic agriculture. He currently works with Freedom Farm Community in Orange County, New York since 2021 where he directs food production and distribution for Freedom Farm Community's unique mission to share food freely as a gift with people who struggle to access fresh produce. Will's experience has primarily been with nonprofit organizations that combine farming, education, hospitality, and faith practice ranging from growing food for a conference and retreat center in Rockland County, New York to producing fresh vegetables on-site at charter schools in South Texas. He especially loves growing tomatoes and lettuce, cooking with his daughters, and eating all the goodies grown on the farm.



Ashanti Williams

Community Farmer

Ashanti Williams is the founder of Black Yard Farm Collective. A Black woman farmer raised in the Bronx by activists and land stewards with roots in the Carolinas. She is passionate about working with animals and building sustainable farm systems. Experiencing a lack of safe, inclusive learning environments for people of color in animal agriculture inspired her to create those spaces for others.





Zach Metzger

Community Farmer

Zack Metzger co-owns Laughing Earth Farm in Cropseyville, NY, with his wife and farm partner, Annie. Together they have run this 200-year-old small diversified farm for nearly a decade. The 175-acre farm includes 10 acres of certified organic vegetables and flowers, along with certified organic pastured chickens and turkeys and organically managed pork and beef. Zack leads the farm's accounting, operations, maintenance, and hay production. Laughing Earth feeds its community through a CSA, a self-service on-farm store open 7 days a week, and the Troy Waterfront Farmers Market every Saturday of the year.

