

Growing Awareness: The Story of Seeds

How a RI Whole Foods Market and an independent director are shedding light on the seed crisis



by **Despina Durand**

The upcoming July screenings of *Open Sesame: The Story of Seeds* are the end result of a serendipitous ambition sparked by the film itself. Bonnie Combs, Marketing team leader at the University Heights Whole Foods Market, saw the film when it screened at the Cable Car Cinema & Cafe this past April after a friend of hers in the bakery at Whole Foods told her about how she had contributed to the Kickstarter that funded the film.

Open Sesame is a documentary that looks at the struggle between seed farmers and big agri businesses, such as Monsanto, over who has the rights to seeds. Seeds, the film argues, are the source of all life, and the basis of civilization. Without them, none of the things that we have today would exist. The move to patent seeds has gravely endangered biodiversity and farming.

Open Sesame director Sean Kaminsky, based out of Brooklyn, did not intend to make a full length film about seeds. The project started as an idea for a short film when he realized that the things he had been reading about seed patenting had a lot in common with the conversations happening around proprietary formats in digital media. (Proprietary formats are processes of encoding files that mean that they can be only opened with a specific program. For example, .doc, .ppt, and other Microsoft file formats.)

"I felt like they were turning seeds more into information than food," Kaminsky explained.

But he discovered as he set off to his interviews that it was a very emotional topic. Sophia Maravell of the Brickyard Education Farm, one of his subjects, told him that 95% of the vegetable biodiversity has disappeared in the last 100 years. Each interviewee prompted him to speak with another on the subject, snowballing the project to a new level.

“It crept up on me.”

Combs originally approached the RISD Metcalf auditorium to screen the film, but while she awaited a response, she learned that the Cranston Public Library had started a seed library of their own, and they quickly agreed to host a screening of *Open Sesame*. Combs still wanted a screening in Providence, and ultimately Metcalf got back to her with an affirmative.

Kaminsky will be at the screening at the William Hall Library in Cranston, on July 30, to talk with the audience about the film. The following day representatives from the Seed Savers Exchange will lead a workshop on saving and sharing seeds.

“What I felt was that I wanted to leave people feeling inspired and hopeful, rather than in a place of anger and sadness,” Kaminsky explained of *Open Sesame*’s contrast with the trend of food documentaries to leave viewers drained or frustrated by the actions and indifference of big business. Kaminsky’s hope is that the film will inspire people to engage in learning more about seeds, advocating for them, and even saving them.

And from the way Combs has reacted, it seems he has already succeeded. Combs described how the film left her wanting to bring people together to educate them about seeds. And she has already thrown herself head first into the issue; she is going on a retreat to Decorah, Iowa for a summer conference hosted by the Seed Savers Exchange.

“It takes so much to make a film- you want to believe it will make a difference, and to know that it impacted someone so much. It’s been really inspiring,” Kaminsky said of Combs.

But Kaminsky does not want to tell people how they should engage with what they learn, and realizes that not everyone will in the same way.

“If there is only one thing you can do, plant a seed,” he said. The experience of planting a seed is powerful, he explained. Putting it into the earth and watching it grow connects us to our ancestors who created civilization through the millions of seeds they planted and cultivated.

Combs’ journey has mirrored Kaminsky’s. From that first screening, she has tapped into the local seed saving culture. She learned that the person who requested that first screening of the film at the Cable Car was Bill Braun who runs the Ivory Silo Seed Project in Westport. He will be one of the speakers at the Providence screening of *Open Sesame*. The issue has swept her up. She wants to make it a priority for people to know about the importance of seeds. And she has high hopes.

“Bringing people together with an interest in a topic is the greatest thing. It’s so rewarding,” Combs said.

Open Sesame: the Story of Seeds will be screening July 24 at 7pm at Metcalf Auditorium. And July 30 at 6pm at William Hall Library. The seed saving workshop will be July 31 at 6:30pm. For more on the film visit www.opensesamemovie.com.