

# In Their Own Words... Jeff Brown

Anne Saporito 10 May 2010

Jeff Brown is the Founder, President and CEO of Brown's Super Stores, which operates 10 ShopRite supermarkets in the region. Brown's Super Stores has been recognized by the White House as well as numerous local and national media outlets for its efforts in serving low-income communities who often suffer the effects of living in a "food desert," a community that lacks access to healthy and affordable food. Jeff Brown is also Founder and Chairman of a public 501(c)(3) nonprofit, UpLift Solutions ([www.upliftsolutions.org](http://www.upliftsolutions.org)), which serves governments, supermarket operators and manufacturers, and nonprofits interested in correcting food desert challenges in the United States with a comprehensive menu of services to support such efforts.

Why supermarkets? How did you get into the industry and what has made you stay?

I'm a fourth-generation grocer and, as a boy, I worked with my dad at a grocery store in a diverse neighborhood in West Philly. I had a strong business and finance background from my schooling. As I continued working in supermarkets in neighborhoods with many different kinds of people, I came to

understand and to believe in the connection between business and community success.

## What is the Fresh Food Financing Initiative?

Over twenty million Americans throughout the country live in food deserts, lacking access to healthy and reasonably priced food. This is a result of a financial gap that supermarkets face in lower-income communities. The supermarkets have attempted to reduce the gap by raising prices and lowering wages, services and conditions, angering their consumers and accelerating store failures as a result. The nature of the gap results from operating costs generally being higher (security, more costly trade unions increase building costs, etc.), while margins generally are lower (related to high purchases of staples and commodities and less of more profitable discretionary goods). The Fresh Food Financing Initiative (FFFI) is an innovative state program designed to increase the number of supermarkets and grocery stores in underserved communities across Pennsylvania, while serving the financing needs of store operators in these underserved communities, where infrastructure costs and credit needs cannot be filled solely by conventional financial institutions. The objective of FFFI is to fill some of the financial gap for the supermarket operator so they have an improved chance to innovate and use smart entrepreneurial practices to

make their new supermarkets successful and sustainable in lower-income communities.

How did the Initiative come to be?

In 2003, I sat around a table with other grocers in the region at a meeting convened by the Food Trust in Philadelphia. We discussed the problem of obesity and its relationship to socio-economic status and access to food options. I knew it had to be a solvable problem and I knew government should be part of the conversation. Pennsylvania State Representative Dwight Evans and Jeremy Nowak from The Reinvestment Fund were at that same meeting. The three of us talked about the different worlds each represents, and how we could collaborate on something to provide a solution. The result of that conversation was the Fresh Food Financing Initiative.

The President and First Lady have both pointed to you and your work as part of the solution to health problems on a national scale. Why?

Basically FFFI is designed to address issues of health and obesity. Generally speaking, many of us are eating processed foods and lacking exercise. However, in poorer communities, with almost no access to healthy foods, the epidemic is greater. Grocery stores need to do a better job of delivering healthy foods to consumers at a good price.

I think what's really innovative about FFFI is the diversity in partners that are at the table, all being committed to the same goal. Community-based collaboration is the key to success in this model, and we really believe it can work in every community across the country. You can't create policy in a vacuum. The White House has supported the FFFI from the beginning and now is focused on bringing it to a national audience. President Obama has built this into the 2011 budget, and the First Lady has integrated Food Access as one of the four legs in her Let's Move campaign.

So the Fresh Food Financing Initiative can work in other communities?

Absolutely. When you consider the gap we talked about earlier, you need two things: a funded Community Development Financing Institution (CDFI) that can do grocery lending and make up part of the gap, and an experienced store operator who can work creatively to accommodate for the other part. These things are either already existing or will soon be available in every region of the U.S. There probably needs to be seven or eight CDFIs around the country who can provide the grants, loans and tax credits to local grocers, as The Reinvestment Fund has done in Philadelphia. The U.S. Healthy Food Financing Initiative will include technical assistance funds, so that these grocers can access the training,

tools and consulting services, from UpLift and others, necessary to create the shift in thinking that is so critical in adopting this model of business.

What kinds of shifts?

A huge part of the success of this model has been our ability to address certain social challenges and relationships with communities in a unique way. I'm involved in a nonprofit organization called UpLift Solutions, which will help ensure that training and technical assistance are available to help grocers understand this paradigm shift, and operate their businesses accordingly.

Providing health services inside the supermarket, and even food and medical supplies to the homebound, are new ideas currently in development. Ensuring that foods and products are culturally relevant is another key component. In this model, the supermarket is a hub for the community; a safe environment where a range of services and products is provided. UpLift Solutions wants to help business owners around the country to learn how to make this happen.

What are some themes of leadership and innovation that have emerged throughout your own career?

Growing up working in a diverse environment quickly conditioned me to be a flexible thinker and respectful

of people's differences. Listening to others became second nature to me at a young age, and I developed an ability to creatively solve problems. Coming together collaboratively at the community level is the first step to sustainable solutions. I am committed to working on this problem of food access in our country until it's completely solved.

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