

NINA MOINI: Farming isn't usually a job that puts you on stage in front of an audience, but I'm willing to guess every farmer out there has stories to tell, and six farmers from around the state will tell theirs at the Minneapolis Central Library this evening. The event is called Celebrating Minnesota's Farmers, a Love Story, and it's part of a storytelling series by the global nonprofit Food Tank. Food Tank president Danielle Nierenberg is on the line to talk about it with us. Thanks for being here, Danielle.

DANIELLE NIERENBERG: Oh, thanks so much for having me.

NINA MOINI: We're also honored to have Anita Fondikum, owner and operator of Shining Lights Farm in Princeton in Central Minnesota there. She's one of the storytellers to be featured tonight. Thank you for being here as well, Anita.

ANITA FONDIKUM: Thank you for having me.

NINA MOINI: Anita, I'd love to start with you. Could you start by telling us a little bit about your farm and what you grow?

ANITA FONDIKUM: So my farm is shining lights farm located in Princeton as you said. So my mission is we grow our cultural produces. I come from Cameroon to be specific. So leaving Cameroon and coming here and then going to Walmart, and I don't find those regular vegetables that I usually eat. That actually makes me to think since I already have a background in agriculture, why can I not do it here and be able to make my community also benefit from that?

So mostly, we produce njama njama, as we call it in our culture, bitter leaves, water leaves. We have African corn, which is different from what we have here the sweet corn. We have our own African pumpkins, our own African eggplants and all that. We also grow some tomatoes, Collard greens that we also eat in our community. So those, yeah.

NINA MOINI: Wonderful. And Danielle, you've held these storytelling events all across the world, Ireland, Australia, I'm seeing here in New York City, Utah. What brings you to Minnesota?

DANIELLE NIERENBERG: We love coming back to the Midwest. I'm originally from Missouri. There's so many great stories here. There's so many wonderful farmers like Anita who are changing their communities. It's really time that organizations like Food Tank and others shine a spotlight on what's happening in Minnesota and all over the Midwest.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, Anita, when I hear you talking about seeing a need and then saying, I can help to fulfill that need, I think that's one of the bravest things that people can do when you're taking something like that on and it's impacting other people. How does it feel to be growing pieces of your culture, essentially, that you can share with others in your community and beyond?

ANITA FONDIKUM: So I really feel fulfilled. I am happy with what I'm doing when I go to the farm, when I come back. I can spend the whole day at the farm. I am happy with what I'm doing. I'm happy with myself. I'm happy with the fact that I actually take my kids to also experience this part of it.

Just knowing that leaving Cameroon and coming here is not a barrier for me to not actually enjoy those heritage, those cultural heritage that we used to. It makes me fulfilled and also making my community enjoying part of it. Bringing other kids to the farm, their parents will bring them to the farm, it makes them happy because sometimes we bring our kids here, they grow here, they don't even what is back home. They don't even have that experience. They don't even how what they are eating is being grown.

And then most importantly, my mom, she is here now and taking her to the farm is therapeutic for her than just sitting at home. When it's winter, she would just be begging that, oh, let it be summer, I need to go to the farm because that is what she has done all her life. So giving that back to her here in America, I just feel that I'm just doing the right thing. And I feel fulfilled about that.

NINA MOINI: Danielle, the United Nations actually declared 2026 the International Year of the Women Farmer, coming out of Anita's story about her and her mother and just the legacy that so many women leave for generations of women after them. I understand tonight's event is going to feature all women farmers and that your organization also created a documentary short about several Irish women farmers. So as you hear these stories, what are some of the common themes that stand out to you, Danielle?

DANIELLE NIERENBERG: I mean, I think the common themes are women who are not just farmers wives, they are farmers. They are working the land. They are becoming entrepreneurs and innovators. They are doing things like Anita is doing, growing those culturally relevant foods. Women are at the center of our farming systems across the globe. And without them, we can't have a sustainable future.

Women make up about half of the agricultural labor force worldwide. In some countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, they make up about 70% of all farmers. It's time that women get the respect and honor that they deserve because they are the ones who are doing most of the farming.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. And Danielle, how did you find people specifically and connect with women farmers whose stories you wanted to have shared tonight?

DANIELLE NIERENBERG: We connected with Anita through another farmer who will be joining us tonight, Sina War. She was introduced to us through the city of Minneapolis. We have several partners here, including American Farmland Trust, Organic Valley, Niman Ranch, and our friend, former Minnesota Secretary of State Mark Ritchie.

So those connections that built over the last 14 or so years, we're really lucky to have them, not just in the United States but all over the world. So we're really grateful to those partners.

NINA MOINI: And Anita, I'm curious to how you prepare for telling your story in this kind of a venue in front of this kind of an audience. I don't know if you do that type of thing often, but is there a specific way you tried to prepare yourself?

ANITA FONDIKUM: So there is no specific way that I try to prepare myself because the story I'm going to tell is just what I grew up experiencing. I think the only thing I'm adding is this season, we grew some njama njama at the farm. So we did the preparation, my mom, myself, and my kids were all there. We did this video, we harvested at the farm. We actually cooked that at the farm. And then we had some friends coming around. We shared that meal together just the way we do other farm back home.

And then we also do corn roasting, the way we roast our corn back home, we use the three fire sides, not our modern fire sides that we have here. So we use our local fire side. We just made a little video just to portray that character, just to portray as we do it back home.

NINA MOINI: Amazing. Danielle, what do you hope that people take away from tonight's event, which is again at the Minneapolis Central Library? What are you hoping folks walk away with, even for someone who doesn't have family or much of a background in agriculture?

DANIELLE NIERENBERG: Yeah, I think it's important to understand that farmers enjoy what they're doing. It's backbreaking labor, for sure, but farmers farm because they love it. They love their land. They love their culture. They love their community. And they want to be part of the culture system that feeds our souls and feeds the world. That's what I want people to take away from this, that farmers, again, deserve that respect and that they bring joy to all of us through delicious food.

NINA MOINI: And Anita, I'll give you the last question here. What are your hopes for the event tonight? What do you hope people gain?

ANITA FONDIKUM: For the event tonight, I hope that people that don't my culture to at least learn something about other cultures. And then secondly, I want other Africans who leave Africa and they come here to the United States, they should also think about going out there, doing those things that they always do. It must not be following the trend of coming here, mostly we go to do health care. It's very important too.

I did health care myself before doing what I'm doing right now. But our heritage, I want us to teach our kids. I want them to just take it back home that being here does not mean you are away from your roots. Wherever you are, you can actually practice that culture. You can actually do what you have been doing no matter what, if you really want to do it and if you are passionate about it.

NINA MOINI: Anita and Danielle, thank you both for your time. We really appreciate it and wish you all the best with the event tonight.

DANIELLE NIERENBERG: Thank you.

ANITA FONDIKUM: Thank you so much.

NINA MOINI: Danielle Nierenberg is President of the nonprofit Food Tank and Anita Fondikum is owner and operator of Shining Lights Farm in Princeton. The event, again, celebrating Minnesota's farmers, a Love Story is tonight at the Minneapolis Central Library. It's from 6:00 PM to 8:00 PM.