



GROWING HOME

2025 STAFF BIOS

LEADERSHIP TEAM

JANELLE ST. JOHN | Executive Director, Growing Home



Janelle St. John has been Growing Home's Executive Director since 2020, after serving as the organization's Chief Fund Development and Communications Officer for over a year. Since stepping into leadership, Janelle has guided the creation of Growing Home's 3-year working plan, deepening the organization's commitment to the Englewood community. Under her leadership, Growing Home surpassed its food distribution goal, with 61% of produce reaching Greater Englewood last year—well above the original 50% target.

In 2025, Janelle was invited to join an elite panel of thought leaders at the Climate Action Summit in Kansas City, where she will share insights on climate change and its impact on urban farming. Her participation highlights Growing Home's leadership in adapting to shifting weather patterns, protecting soil health, and expanding access to water resources—critical challenges that directly affect how we grow food and serve our communities. Janelle's voice on this national stage not only affirms her expertise but also amplifies Growing Home's mission: building a more equitable, sustainable food system for Chicago and

beyond.

Prior to her work at Growing Home, Janelle spent five years with Edgewater Health, a Community Mental Health Center in Gary, IN, where she served as Chief Development and Communications Officer and later Chief Strategy Officer. She brings over 23 years of nonprofit leadership experience, with a master's degree in Public Service Administration from DePaul University and a bachelor's in Political Science from the University of Chicago.

On her passion for leading Growing Home, Janelle shares, *"Growing Home, Inc. allows me the unique opportunity to make a difference in a community that I am very passionate about. I live only blocks away from Englewood and have many family and friends who are residents of the Englewood Community. Growing Home, Inc. is in a unique position to make an impact in a community that is a designated food desert with high unemployment."*

ZENOBIA WILLIAMS | Director of Employment Training



Zenobia Williams is the Director of Employment Training at Growing Home. In this position she is responsible for planning and overseeing the workforce development program. She and her team concentrate their skills towards participant recruitment, classroom training, case management, job placement and retention.

Zenobia has over 20 years of experience in the workforce development arena. Her areas of expertise include program development/management, training, quality assurance, entrepreneurship development, process improvements, strategic planning, risk management, and relationship development. Prior to joining the Growing Home team, she held roles with the following organizations: OAI, Inc., CEDA, SGA Youth and Family Services and Chicago Urban League.

Zenobia has a Bachelor of Arts in Organizational and Human Resources Management. She also contributes her time and talent as a board member and volunteer for Saving Lives, Inc., a local mental health social service agency.

Melinda Craigs-Ingram | Director of Operations and External Affairs



Melinda joined Growing Home as the Director of Operations and External Affairs. My primary objective is to support the organization by gaining a deep understanding of each team member's role. Melinda will oversee program operations and resource development for all Growing Home initiatives, ensuring effective coordination with program directors. In this new position, she will take a proactive role in strategic planning processes and lead the development of Growing Home's new site. Additionally, she will work closely with the Executive Director to keep Growing Home's Board of Directors informed about program strategies and challenges.

Prior to joining Growing Home, Melinda served as the SNAP Outreach Manager and later as the Senior Manager of Public Policy and Benefits at Northern Illinois Food Bank for four and a half years. During the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, she led a dedicated team of ten, tirelessly assisting neighbors across 102 counties in Illinois. The mission was to connect those in need with vital benefits and resources. Together, her team completed over 10,000 SNAP applications, making a significant impact on food security. Fueled by a lifelong commitment to helping others, she embraced an advocacy role, becoming a voice for neighbors. She raised awareness about food insecurity, whether in Washington, D.C., or

Springfield, championing key bills and advocating for a stronger farm bill. Melinda's sentiment is "it's never just about the paperwork—it's about driving meaningful, lasting change".

For eight years, Melinda served as a Certified Application Counselor at Crusader Community Health, a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) in Rockford, IL. In the Outreach and Enrollment Department, she worked closely with individuals at pivotal moments in their lives, providing assistance with Medicaid, Marketplace coverages, and connecting them to vital community resources. Guided by the motto, 'Teach a person to fish,' she believes in empowering others through knowledge and resources to foster self-sufficiency and resilience. Melinda's experiences have shown her the profound impact of extending grace during challenging times.

Melinda holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Human Services from Judson University and proudly considers herself a lifelong learner. In her free time, Melinda practices self-care through long walks, crafting, painting, reading, and actively participating in church events. It takes a village and this is the best place to promote self sufficiency and empowerment.

EZRA LEE | Director of Urban Farms



Ezra is currently the Director of Urban Farms for Growing Home. Since joining Growing Home's farm team in 2021, they have focused on continuing and enriching the urban farm as a forum for training, education, and vegetable production. Balancing these missions has guided their practices in both the way the farm operates and the cultivation of a team that is compassionate and challenging. During Ezra's time at Growing Home, the farm has updated its growing practices to reflect high production use of the 1.75 acre farm while remaining accessible for trainees, updated infrastructure for long term success including adding retention walls and mixed irrigation, and shifted the vast majority of distribution of the 35,000 lbs of food grown annually on the site to reach people in food insecure communities and especially Englewood.

Ezra's people-first approach to urban agriculture is driven by their experiences growing food on a range of sustainable farms in upstate New York and western Massachusetts. From school gardens to family farms, nonprofits to wholesale distribution, their knowledge of regenerative agriculture both in growing and in structure spans 9 years. Because of the disparity in food access and the difficult financial

nature of small-scale agriculture, Ezra has developed an appreciation and dedication to the work that social enterprises can do to smooth these incongruities by providing material needs, supportive environments, and educational opportunities for local communities.

Ezra holds a bachelor's degree in Politics from Bard College at Simon's Rock and you may spot them rowing on the Chicago river, savoring a meal from Chicago's wealth of cuisine, or trying their own hand at baking.

AUDIA WELLS | Director of Human Resources



Audia's greatest gift is found in how she helps individuals, corporations and small businesses navigate transitions. As the founder of WellsWorx HR Consulting, she specializes in the delivery of change management and HR solutions. TILT promotes equity, access and growth in businesses and communities through impactful implementation and training initiatives.

Wells' tenure in HR ranges from supporting Fortune 500 legacies to start-up pioneers in the fields of Entertainment, Professional Services, Manufacturing, Finance, Faith-based, Non-Profit, Pharma and Higher Education. With high-touch HR acumen, she is regularly appointed to lead critical initiatives including: building HR functions, mergers and acquisitions, change management, strategic planning, performance management, and training/development. Through whole systems thinking and tailored approaches, Wells helps organizations deftly convert challenges into sweet spots to meet business objectives. An artist at heart, she seeks creative ways to match and cultivate strategies that give form to positions and organizations. She works with nonprofits, social enterprises, and values-based businesses that don't just want to grow, but want to do so

ethically, equitably, and with purpose. Growing Home exemplifies just that.

FARM STAFF

ANNA SUMSKA | Farm and Program Coordinator



Anna is a Farm Educator at Growing Home. She's been with Growing Home since 2019, starting as a Production Assistant in Cohort 1, staying on as an intern and getting hired as a full-time Farm Educator in January 2020.

Before joining Growing Home, Anna grew at every opportunity she had: in fields, gardens, suburban and urban environments. She had a very successful garden in the city for four years, growing everything from lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers and corn on mounds of soil. When she was little, Anna took care of 15 bee hives with her grandfather and continues to work with Growing Home's bee hives today.

Anna loves many aspects of her work at Growing Home: working outside; participating in organic growing; harvesting, direct seeding, transplanting and taking care of everything; having a schedule that changes day-to-day; and of course, being a teacher and mentor to current Production Assistants. As she shares, "I love to pass everything

I have learned on to them, and see them work as a team and finish all these big projects where they feel accomplished and excited about what they are doing together. This is a supportive environment where you are encouraged to grow food – and grow yourself." Anna's favorite vegetables are kohlrabi and radishes!

JOVAN WADE | Farm Educator



Jovan Wade is a 2017 Growing Home graduate. He returned to Growing Home in June of 2021 as an intern and began working as a Farm Educator in 2022. The need for quality and local nutrition motivates him to continue his work in agriculture. Jovan has always been invested in living amongst plants! With over 20 years of experience growing houseplants, gardening in and around his home, and maintaining countless freshwater tanks for himself and others, he brings a great level of creativity and problem solving to the farm. He hopes to share his passions by educating people about urban agriculture through field work, microgreens, and small space growing.

Jovan is an avid hobbyist and his favorite way to get around the city is by bike. Whether it's his ebike or road bike, you can find him commuting, relaxing, or getting new groups of cyclists out along the lake and far beyond. At home he keeps fresh greens on hand by growing microgreens in his custom apartment set up. Jovan's most recent cooking tip: "Radish microgreens are a great hot sauce substitute for eggs. They've got 20x more nutrients per gram than mature vegetables!"

ALICIA BRUMFIELD | Farm Educator

SONIA GARCIA | Farm Sales Associate



Sonia is Growing Home's Farm Sales Associate - you will see her at Green City Market or dropping off delicious produce to our partners and community members throughout the week! Sonia is a 2016 Alumni of Growing Home, where she was hired half way through the cohort at Christy Webber Landscaping.

Even then, Sonia would stay a part of Growing Home's family, coming to Growing Home on her day off to assist with markets. She eventually took over as the Farm Sales Associate at Growing Home and has now managed Growing Home's Green City Market and formerly the Logan Square Market for 9 seasons. Her favorite part of the market is the people and the pets - seeing familiar faces stop by our red Growing Home tent for delicious produce and conversation.

In 2024 Sonia began working full time at Growing Home to help support the growing delivery network, run the Thursday farmstand, train production assistants on customer service, and grow produce with the rest of the farm team.

CHENA ALEXANDER | Farm Market Associate

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT STAFF

MARY DEVO | Information Technology Specialist

Mary Devo is Growing Home's Information Technology Specialist and Educator in our Growing Home Computer and Job Resource Center. She is an experienced database administrator of schools within the Archdiocese of Chicago. She's also an accomplished datacenter specialist who has worked with virtual systems like VMware and Docker and is currently pursuing her AWS Cloud Foundations Badge to be an Amazon Cloud Practitioner career where her knowledge with virtualization, containers and database can be applied. Mary greatly enjoys educating adults and students in digital skills and literacy because she believes this knowledge is essential to improve our society.

TROY THOMPSON | Information Technology Training Assistant



Troy Thompson is an IT professional, military veteran, and proud alumnus of the Growing Home IT Program. He currently serves as a Teacher's Assistant at Growing Home Inc., where he supports instructors and students by fostering a hands-on, inclusive learning environment centered on technical skill-building and career readiness.

Born in Chicago's Englewood community and raised amid the challenges of Chicago's inner city, Troy brings a powerful lived experience to his role—one that deepens his empathy and passion for community-driven change. Having once been a student in the very program he now helps lead, Troy understands firsthand the barriers students face and is deeply committed to guiding them through their journey.

With a background in both the service industry and the military, Troy combines discipline, adaptability, and a people-first mindset in his approach to mentorship and instruction. His dedication to the IT field and to uplifting underserved communities reflects the mission of Growing Home Inc.—to build pathways to opportunity, empowerment, and lasting impact.

JANICE ELLIS | Workforce Development Specialist



Janice is the Workforce Development Specialist at Growing Home. Janice's focus is on building relationships, fostering connections and encouraging active participation within a community which involves outreach, communication, event coordination and program development to strengthen relationships between an organization and its community. Janice also has an essential role in obtaining new employer and community partnership.

Before joining the Growing Home family, Janice has over 20 years in healthcare in administrative work including at Ann & Robert Lurie Children's Hospital in the Department of Child Psychiatry until she started at Growing Home in August 2022.

Janice's most recent achievement is the relaunch of the Alumni Board which fosters lifelong relationships between alums and Growing Home to provide resources and communication to empower personal and professional growth.

Janice also has a love for community engagement which include participation and volunteering in the Auburn Gresham, Englewood, Chatham and surrounding Chicagoland areas and communities which includes working on the campaign team for a candidate for Secretary of State (May 2021-June 2022), collaborating with the 17th Ward office and Block

By Block For Auburn Gresham.

Janice's hobbies include singing and music ministry, traveling, and planning events to gather family and friends.

CANDICE FRAZIER | Training & Development Specialist



Candice Frazier is a Chicago native currently residing on Chicago's South Side. She now serves as a Training & Development Specialist in the Employment Training Department and is excited to bring her love of community and her passion for Urban Agriculture to the Growing Home family.

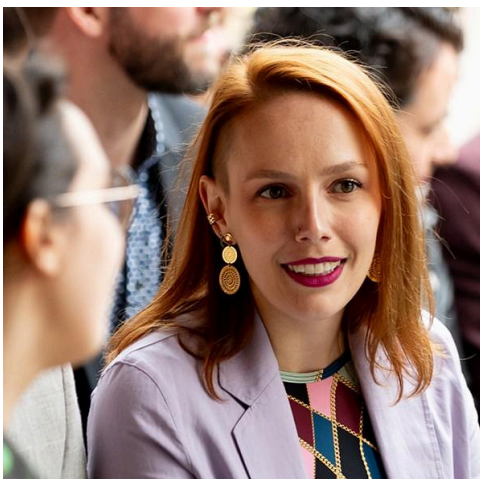
Candice studied Vocal Performance and Theatre at Columbia College Chicago, and has used her creative skills and talents in many ways. Her background includes a wide breadth of experience in areas such as food service & fine dining, hospitality, travel & transportation, promotional marketing & direct sales, community development, holistic health & healing, and the entertainment arts. Candice's love of nature, along with her desire to educate and inspire others, lead her to the intersection of Workforce Development & Urban Agriculture.

In 2018, following an artist's residency, Candice became a Nature Counselor for the Chicago Park District's Harvest Garden program. As a Nature Counselor Candice grew and maintained several gardens and gave garden instruction to youth ages 5 to 12. This instruction focused on fun and creative ways to learn about and experience seed saving, planting, tending, harvesting and tasting fresh fruits, herbs, and vegetables.

After which, she became a member of the Urban Growers Collective, wherein she serviced the community through a mobile produce market. This market addressed the growing need for healthy farm fresh produce in areas with low access to quality foods.

Since then, Candice has become an avid and enthusiastic food grower and burgeoning farmer. As a Training & Development Specialist, Candice will instruct participants on Environmental Literacy, Job Readiness, and Social Emotional Wellness. She seeks to engage the greater Chicago communities by addressing the need for food access and equity, community safety and empowerment, and providing resources and education, while fostering social and cultural exchange and community enrichment.

ANA GAGLIARDI | Workforce Development Specialist



Ana Gagliardi is a Workforce Development Specialist at Growing Home. Born and raised in Brazil, she brings a dynamic blend of expertise developed through her work in education, communications, operations, and workforce development. With a passion for creating change and improving the community, Ana works to build meaningful relationships with participants and employer partners to create sustainable career pathways.

In her previous position as Culinary Program Manager at the Gary Comer Youth Center, she designed, implemented and led hands-on training programs, supporting youth in exploring cooking as a life skill or a potential career. She also has a wide-range of experience in marketing and communication, from creative to operations.

Ana holds a Bachelor's Degree in Languages and Literature, and reading and learning new languages are an integral part of her leisure time. In

addition to that, Ana enjoys spending time outside and exploring her creativity through cooking, embroidering, and writing.

GABRIEL ALMODOVAR | Training & Development Specialist



Gabriel returned home to Chicago after over a decade and a half in LA and NYC where he worked as a makeup & hair educator, makeup artist, and hair stylist. His desire to work with people on a deeper level and being an experienced trainer led him to work with a Latina created and owned mental health agency here in Chicago before he found his way to Growing Home. Gabriel will be able to combine his passions of educating and helping people grow in his role as a Training & Development Specialist in the Employment Training Department.

Gabriel holds a B.A. in Fashion Management from Columbia College Chicago along with a M.A. in Organizational Leadership with a concentration in Training & Development from Lewis University. His 20+ year background in education/training paired with his love of helping others grow and develop make him an integral member of the team.

Although Gabriel does not farm, he very much appreciates those that do since he has a newfound passion for eating healthy and working out. He works with a nutritionist and counts his macros. He also stays very active by playing in two different volleyball leagues and a pickleball league.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT STAFF

NATALIE ARCHIE | Controller



Natalie recently joined GH in the role of Controller. She is responsible for supporting and assisting the Executive Director, with duties as assigned, with cash flow management, policy development and implementation, and all other financial administrative aspects of the organization operations.

Prior to assuming the role of Controller with GH, her professional experience included positions held as grants administrator, finance and database associate, grant writer and property manager working in a variety of social service organizations including those focused on advocacy, mental health, and affordable housing. Most recent position was as a financial examiner, with the Illinois Department of Insurance, financial regulatory division. Natalie holds a Bachelors in Accounting, from the University of Wisconsin – Green Bay, and a Masters in Nonprofit Management, from DePaul University.

Hobbies include fashion, traveling, reading all genres of nonfiction (excluding horror), listening to music and walking along the Chicago lakefront.

LAQUANDRA FAIR | Community Engagement Coordinator



LaQuandra Fair is Growing Home's Community Engagement Coordinator and resident self-taught cook! LaQuandra plans outreach efforts focusing on volunteer management, tours, workshops, events, and food access.

She is a 2016 Cohort 2 graduate of Growing Home's employment training program and was then hired as a part-time Outreach Assistant of Growing Home in April 2017. Working her way up to Community Engagement Associate, LaQuandra was then promoted to Community Engagement Coordinator in 2019. She oversaw the successful development of the Learning Garden which produced a bounty of produce for tours and donation. Prior to Growing Home, LaQuandra spent 6 years in the United States Marine Corp. LaQuandra has a long history of community service and empowering others.

MAWIYAH STEWART | Executive Administrative Assistant



Mawiyah Stewart is Growing Home's Executive Administrative Assistant. Mawiyah is a Chicago North Side native. She is a 1st generation American (with immigrant parents who stem from Trinidad & Tobago). In this position, she hopes to accomplish organizing and assisting in the Administration part of the Growing Home Organization.

She has over 20 years of experience working in the Nursing Home field, and welcomes the opportunity in working and assisting in nonprofit work. Some of Mawiyah's hobbies include; Cooking, Poetry Writing, Crafting, Horror films, and spending time with her family and friends.