

# The Oakland Tribune

## Fresh food choices coming to West Oakland

May 16, 2009

By Cecily Burt

OAKLAND —If James Bell ever doubted during the past three-plus years that the Mandela Foods Cooperative would become a reality, he wasn't owning up to it Friday.

"I knew it would happen, I just couldn't say when," Bell said, pausing between carting in boxes of natural juices and setting up display shelves inside the soon-to-be-opened store on Seventh Street. "The reason I stuck around is I wanted it to happen."

Dana Harvey first pitched the idea of a worker-owned cooperative as a way to bring healthy food and economic opportunity to West Oakland residents way back when the Mandela Gateway apartments were nothing more than blueprints.

After more than three years of negotiations, Harvey succeeded in landing a lease in fall 2007 with Bridge Housing for one of the complex's small storefronts between Center Street and Mandela Parkway. The space lacked interior plumbing, venting and wiring, and it took nearly a year to secure funding and several more months to finish the interior.

During that time, Bell and his fellow worker-owners met after work to learn about food, management and retail



operations. They will share all responsibilities — opening, closing, cashiering, stocking, bookkeeping, cooking, ordering, whatever it takes. They were not paid during their training, and although a few of them dropped out, the core group is intact.

Bell said his grandparents moved to the neighborhood in the late 1930s and recounted stories of Seventh Street in its heyday, when it was full of shops and restaurants.

"She wants me to bring her down in her wheelchair so she can shop," Bell said, smiling.

The demolition of businesses on the south side of Seventh Street to make way for BART and a U.S. Post Office in the 1960s sucked the life out of the once-bustling commercial area. West Oakland has more than 20,000 residents but no full-service grocery store.

The co-op will help fill that void by offering a variety of fresh produce from Northern California farms. Bulk nuts, dried fruits, beans and lentils will be sold by weight. The cozy store will stock the usual meat and grocery items, as well as healthy soups,

sandwiches and to-go foods prepared on the premises.

It will have a small variety of staples, but not enough to compete with the 99-Cent Only store on the corner, said worker-owner Dennis Terry, who admitted he was excited it was finally happening, but also a little anxious because he's never started a business.

"Every step along the way there were obstacles, but when you overcome the obstacles, you feel more confident," he said.

Worker-owner Rayma Smith could not stop smiling as she worked Friday readying the store for the June 6 opening. Even though she wasn't paid during the long years of training, she said it will be worth it in the long run.

"I saw a big dream, and it's bigger than we realized," she said. "I knew my payday was going to come."

Tenant improvements to the interior cost about \$650,000, paid for in part with a \$100,000 grant from Bridge Housing and a \$200,000 grant from West Oakland redevelopment funds.