



Tallu Schuyler Quinn '98

2020 SPIRIT OF SERVICE RECIPIENT

by Jessie Morris Adams '00

In the midst of the 2008 financial crisis, Tallu Schuyler Quinn '98 found herself living in Boston, educated and eager, yet unable to find a job—in any field. Like so many young people at that time, she wrestled with the realization that her degrees and ambition were no match for the reality of the economic landscape. Ultimately, she secured employment at a national grocery chain, working third shift well into the late-night hours. Part of her job was to clean out the meat case after closing, putting all the unsold meat in a black garbage bag and taking it out to the dumpster behind the store. Seeing good food treated as trash was difficult to witness for employees making less than ten dollars an hour, and highlighted for Tallu how much edible food is wasted in our food economy. People all over the country were struggling to find work, yet businesses were egregiously throwing away usable food.

The next year, Tallu landed back in Nashville and leveraged that experience to found The Nashville Food Project, with a mission to “bring people together to grow, cook, and share nourishing food, with the goals of cultivating community and alleviating hunger in our city.” Since 2009, she has driven impressive growth in the organization and transformed the way Nashville understands, talks about, and addresses hunger and food insecurity in our midst. The Nashville Food Project currently employs 23 staff members and boasts a legion of over 500 volunteers

each month who work in their gardens and kitchens, prepare and distribute meals, and recover food from local farmers, grocers, and restaurants. Tallu says of her grocery store days, “it felt like a job to nowhere . . . but that ‘job to nowhere’ has been one of the experiences that informs my work the most. Without that difficult experience, I’m not sure I would have known to consider that resource [of discarded food] as something we could beautifully turn into community meals for people to share.”

Today, The Nashville Food Project runs two community kitchens where staff and volunteers cook hot, healthful meals from recovered, donated, and garden-grown food. Food distribution vehicles share approximately 5,500 meals across the Nashville area each week in partnership with over 35 community organizations. An ambitious \$5 million capital campaign recently raised funds to expand operations and further their reach, projecting growth from 175,000 meals distributed in 2018 to over 500,000 in 2022. By those metrics, it would be easy to claim victory—but Tallu notes that success is not linear, inevitable, or complete. She reflects that while feeling like she was sitting in failure in Boston, the experience became something meaningful, for which she carries deep gratitude.

Finding value in struggle is one of the life skills she connects to her experience at Harpeth Hall, along with searching for creative solutions to multi-faceted problems. She loved photography and art as a Harpeth Hall student and went on to earn her undergraduate degree in studio art, and believes that much of art is essentially about solving problems: “I’ve got this idea that I need to communicate to a wider audience, and these tools, and this medium . . . how am I going to share this idea that I have in a way people will understand?” Similarly, tackling day-to-day challenges in her work, thinking about the big-picture dimensions of starting and growing a nonprofit, and working to address community need are all, at their core, about problem solving.



Tallu and her family at the groundbreaking for the new Nashville Food Project headquarters



“She notes that one of the most transformative aspects of her Harpeth Hall experience was an emphasis on the belief that students can be agents of change, and they are encouraged to think about how they can contribute to solutions, big or small.”

She also reflects gratefully on having received encouragement from faculty to simply be herself, and to dive deeply into her varied interests. In her case, she has always enjoyed cooking, learning about agriculture, social justice, and people. She is also passionate about eradicating poverty and notes, “for me, that was a bunch of things that turned into a career I love, and I’m lucky for that.”

Her affirmative experiences at Harpeth Hall are reflected in her hopes for current students and young alumnae looking to build a better world: “When we have the privilege of piecing together or finding a fit in the world to make us come alive and affect the community around us, that’s a gift.” She emphasizes that today’s students have multiple avenues through which to effect change, because “any big lasting positive social change requires effort from every angle. You can do that in industry, through research, in education and teaching, with on-the-ground activism, by writing influential books or starting a podcast.”



THE NASHVILLE FOOD PROJECT

In fact, her sense is that it will take all of us working together to solve critical problems facing the next generation in Nashville and beyond. Tallu acknowledges that those who work the front lines can become overwhelmed with the enormity of large-scale social challenges, but it is imperative to remain galvanized rather than paralyzed. We can lose sight of how to move forward when we are inundated with so much information, and “it can be easy to wonder how our work matters in the context of big sweeping issues of our time, like climate crisis, gun violence, or disease.” We know we cannot fix everything, so there are days when it feels easier to just do nothing. Tallu and her team at The Nashville Food Project discuss the threat of burnout often, and challenge each other to recognize the signs in themselves and know when to take a break. They ask one another, “what do you do when you’re starting to feel hopeless?”

As Chief Executive Officer, she is acutely aware that her team members might become worn down by the nature of their work, so living honorably has also meant deconstructing what it looks like to lead confidently. If we are going to lead well, “we can be courageous about speaking up when something is wrong. We can talk about injustice and privilege and power. We can use our microphones. We don’t have to do it perfectly, but we can be brave in talking about it. Those of us entrusted to do the teaching, educating, and parenting of the next generation, we can model it.”

Most of all, we need to “show young people that leadership is not about force and power. It’s about being true, equitable, and brave. It’s about showing our vulnerability.” In the end, Tallu says, she is convinced that the answer is to not let perfect be the enemy of good. “Show up, speak up, and remember that we’re here to keep the light on for other people.”