

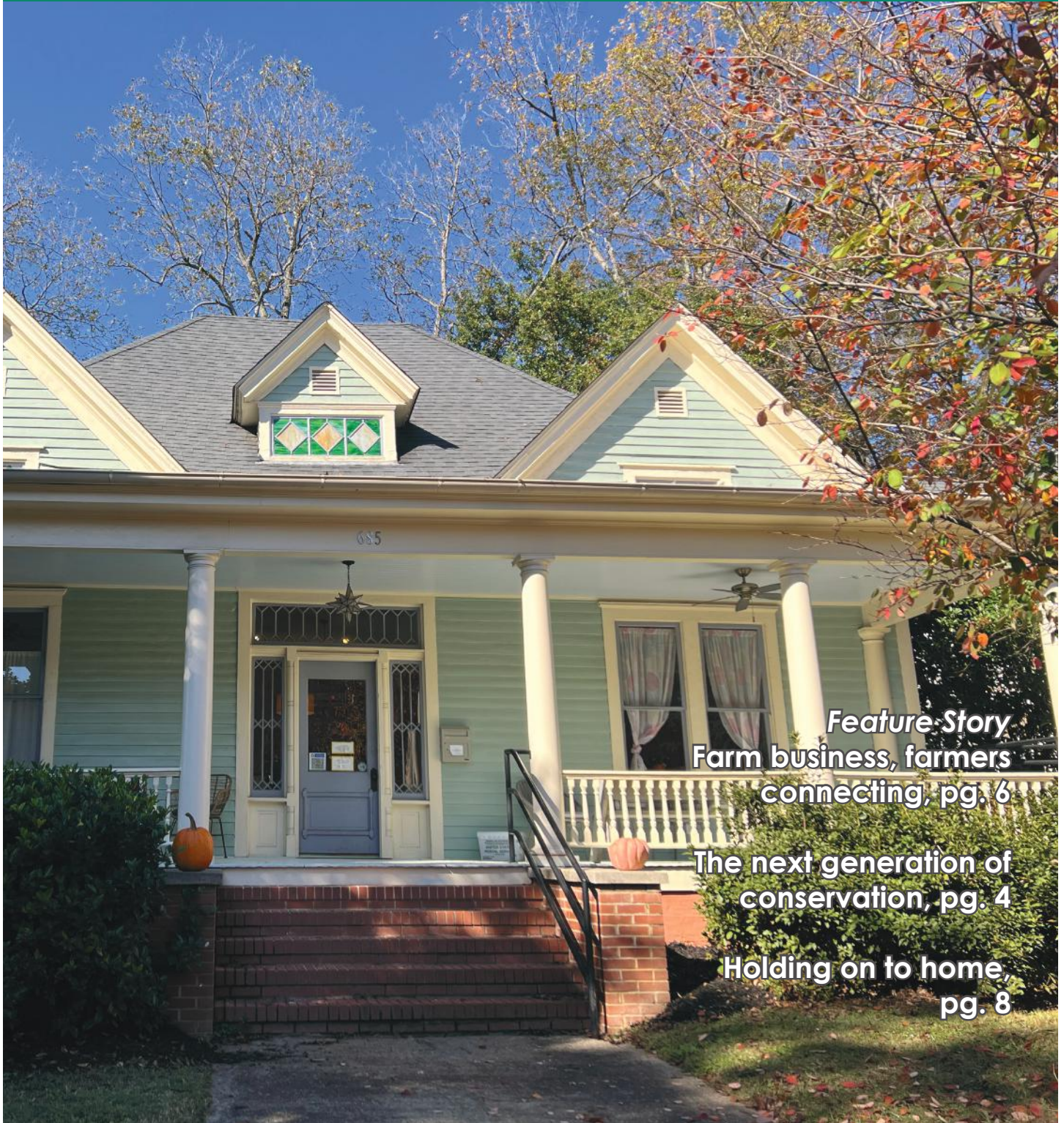


# Athens Land Trust

Celebrating 30 Years

**Newsletter**

Winter 2024 • Vol. 27 • Issue 2



*Feature Story*  
**Farm business, farmers  
connecting, pg. 6**

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*Our Board meets on the third Monday  
of each month at 5:00 pm at  
498 Prince Ave. Athens, GA 30601  
Meetings are open to the public.*

### Staff

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706.613.0122



*Athens Land Trust is a nonprofit, 501(c)(3) organization whose mission is to improve quality of life for all and strengthen the fabric of the community through education and the stewardship of land for affordable housing, conservation, agriculture and economic development. We respond to community-identified needs and build individual and collective power among historically marginalized people.*

## Executive Director's Note | Vanna Cure

As we move through the fall season, looking back on the passing year and forward to the new one to come, we are reminded of the importance of perseverance and resilience. Athens Land Trust continues to push forward, looking ahead with renewed energy to advance our mission with meaningful impact.

This year we completed the first 30-week season of CCSD farm share distribution, providing 1,440 bags of fresh produce to 48 food-insecure families, supporting 133 school-aged children. Our farm business education project is wrapping up its first cohort of six farmers and welcoming the next this month (*see the feature story on page 6 for more on this program*).

Through the Athens Energy Opportunity Program this year we've provided critical repairs and energy efficiency upgrades to 21 homes for Athens residents whose income is at or below the median. Our Young Urban Builders have gained hands-on experience, earning certifications in Building Science Principles and more.

Meanwhile, our Affordable Housing team is preparing to build 10 new affordable homes in West and East Athens, alongside renovations of

three homes in the West Broad area. We've also partnered with the Athens Area Homeless Shelter to offer financial education and housing counseling to families in their programs, with workshops launching in December.

Conservation efforts are also advancing through partnerships with The Conservation Fund and NRCS to preserve over 285 acres of farmland in Rockdale, Lamar, and Meriwether counties, transferring ownership to underserved farmers. Additionally, GA FarmLink has achieved 10 farmland matches, preserving over 300 acres, with a new website and resources that just went live.

Growing up in Athens, I've witnessed firsthand the city's evolution and the growing urgency for preserving our land and creating affordable housing. My family has been a part of this community for nearly four decades, and Athens will always be home. I am incredibly proud to say that Athens Land Trust is stronger than ever and remains deeply committed to advancing our mission of building resilient, equitable communities.

Serving as interim Executive Director and working with the search committee to find Athens Land Trust's next Executive Director has deepened my appreciation for the incredible dedication of our staff and the unwavering support of our community.



*Above: Vanna, as an ALT supporter prior to joining the Board of Directors, and her mother at the Harvest Moon Dinner in 2019; and at the West Broad Farmers Market Fall Festival with her nephew, October 26, 2024.  
On the cover: The Athens Land Trust Pope St. offices.*

Thank you for being with us every step of the way.

In solidarity,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Vanna Cure".



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# The Interview

## Jennifer Appling

### on the real impact of neighborhood revitalization

*Jennifer Appling is a native Athenian and Family Engagement Specialist for Howard B. Stroud Elementary School. She joined the then newly formed North Athens Neighborhood Advisory Board in 2023. We asked Jennifer to share her experience with the YUB program and her role in neighborhood revitalization.*

#### **How did you learn about the Young Urban Builders (YUB) program?**

I learned about the YUB program through friends in the community. I was told that Athens Land Trust had a program that repairs homes and provides energy related tasks. I reached out to Dr. T [Tawana Mattox, ALT's Education & Empowerment Director] and she invited me to an upcoming community training where I could learn about the goals of the program. I learned about "energy burden", and how many people in my neighborhood make hard decisions when it comes time to pay utility bills or other expenses. The more I learned the more interested I was to receive help for my elderly father.

#### **What has having repairs done on your home meant for you and your family?**

Getting the repairs has improved my father's and my quality of life. We were making repairs as we could, but this program gave



us the opportunity to resolve most of our issues. It was also a great learning opportunity as Xavier [Coates, YUB Program Coordinator] was able to go over our energy audit report, and discuss a work plan that would help our home be more sustainable. The work has lowered my stress and utility bills; it has also made my home more presentable.

#### **You're part of the North Athens Advisory Board. Why did you choose to step into this leadership role?**

I was invited to join a leadership training with the West Broad Advisory Board. We learned about the expectations of the advisory board, and how this role impacts our community. The West Broad Advisory Board members shared their priorities and highlighted some of the quarterly community meetings

they led as advisory board members. Their enthusiasm and willingness to share sold me; I said yes to the opportunity. I believed that I would become knowledgeable on issues that impact my neighborhood, and I would be in a position to make sure North Athens residents are no longer left behind and have the information to advocate as a community.

#### **When you think about your community's future, what do you see?**

I see a community that is viable for all residents and provides access to resources and information. I am excited about a recent opportunity for community engagement where we emphasized our desire to be at the table when there are decisions impacting North Athens.

During a recent training, we participated in an Asset-Based Development activity where we identified what we believed to be assets in our community. We included the shopping center, access to restaurants, several gas stations, many churches, urgent care clinics, our schools and manufacturing plants where people work. With the YUB program that prepares students for life and gives them a trade, and opportunities like the advisory board, we will be a stronger community. ♦

# The Next Generation of Conservation

*Young Conservation Stewards work year-round for the greener good*

Urban green spaces and a healthy tree canopy are vital contributors to community wellness thanks to the myriad environmental and socioeconomic benefits they bring: clean air and water, shade and cooling of urban heat islands, space for active and passive recreation.

Since 2018, Athens youth have played a key role in expanding these benefits and connecting the public to local greenspace through ALT's Young Conservation Stewards program. YCS engaged high school students in summer hands-on restoration projects in Athens-Clarke County's Beech Haven nature preserve and Southeast Clarke Park which combined to remediate 40 acres of invaded habitat and trained 30 youth in conservation and leadership skills.

At the same time that YCS are making a hands-on ecological impact, they are learning about urban forestry, gaining job skills, and addressing gaps in the way the environmental benefits of healthy greenspace and urban tree canopy have historically been realized.

This year we worked with ACC to identify Memorial Park's Birchmore Trail for restoration, removing invasive species such as wisteria, Chinese privet, autumn olive and kudzu; so far YCS have restored one and a half



*YCS Coordinator Angela Rivera (left) leads Kayden, Jayda, and Ana in a workday this fall at Williams Farm and Five Acre Woods. Invasive bamboo removed from the woods is being repurposed into fencing at Williams, which houses ALT's incubator farm program.*

of a planned four acres over two years.

We've also begun the first of a four-year grant from the Georgia Forestry Commission to expand YCS from a summer-only program to a year-round employment opportunity and impact more county greenspace.

Five Acre Woods, adjacent to Athens Land Trust's Williams Farm, is an ACCGov property under Conservation Easement with Athens Land Trust. The urban forest is home to hardwood trees and is an important bird habitat, but is also choked with invasives including wisteria, English ivy, and golden bamboo. YCS are working here with the goal of restoring native habitat and re-establishing

a walking and recreation trail through the public property.

Collaborating with the Georgia Forestry Commission, YCS plans to conduct a tree inventory, and with guidance from forestry experts, will plant native saplings during the dormant season.

The YCS program is also working with community partners like UGA's Urban Forestry Program and the State Botanical Garden of Georgia to offer educational sessions and on-site training.

Through this collaborative approach, YCS participants are learning not only how to restore local ecosystems but also how to advocate for lasting change in their communities. ♦



# Feature Story

## Farm Business, Farmers Connecting

### GA FarmLink Farm Business Education program is building farming resilience

Trinice Holden returned home to rural Northwest Georgia to breathe new life into 150 acres of pasture and forest and the cattle operation it supports, both of which have been in her family for generations.

There were -- and still are -- many challenges to be overcome, but Trinice is preserving, holding fast to her vision of Poteete's Farm (a fifth-generation Black farm and ranch) being a place where healthy land provides healthy food for her community.

Small- and medium-scale farmers like Trinice in ALT's network voiced the need for a deeper level of farm business support than was currently accessible. Historically

underserved (HU) farmers and ranchers in particular face the specific need of addressing the long-term depletion of social, financial, and physical capital stemming from previous generations of institutional biases and discrimination in access to federal resources.

In both cases, farmers were struggling to realize the full benefits of conservation practices and USDA programming. Surveying our network of partners, ALT identified intensive farm business development as a major unmet need across farm-serving organizations in Georgia.

The American Rescue Plan Technical Assistance Initiative

presented an opportunity to draw on the well of experience and trust among ALT's growing network of HU farmers and ranchers, as well as statewide and national farm-serving organizations to establish GA FarmLink as a cornerstone program to coordinate technical assistance across multiple providers. This would also allow ALT through GA FarmLink to leverage USDA resources for the benefit of small- and mid-scale farmers and adapt to the specific needs of HU farmers and ranchers in Georgia.

*Below: A pasture at Poteete's Farm in Whitfield Co. Proprietor Trinice Holden is a farmer in the first-year cohort of Athens Land Trust's GA FarmLink Farm Business Education Program. Photo courtesy of Trinice Holden.*



The GA FarmLink Farm Business Education Program aims to enable Georgia farmers to strengthen the foundations of their farm businesses and increase their receipt of federal funding in order to ensure long-term resilience and sustainable profits. The overall goal is to build a cohort of farmers and direct service providers who are prepared to deliver a higher level of holistic farm support in collaboration with USDA partners.

Beginning in February of 2024, and over the course of four years, 30 Georgia farmers (six per 10-month session) will be guided by a team of professional consultants through a farm business curriculum that focuses on topics such as basic accounting, systems for data tracking, business & financial analysis, credit readiness, accessing federal programs and planning for growth. The program will also provide farmers opportunities to develop social capital and build a network through peer-to-peer mentoring and yearly on-farm educational events.

McIntosh S.E.E.D., a rural community development organization with 20 years of work in southeastern Georgia, is our lead partner in this program and is working to adapt and deliver curriculum to farmers in the coastal region. McIntosh S.E.E.D. recruits at least two of the six farmers in each cohort from their network. The organization

also serves as a network hub in their region for coordinated Technical Assistance.

The Conservation Fund, through the Working Farms Fund, ensures the curriculum meets the needs of its growing farmer pipeline, supporting their farmers in implementing their farm plans and engaging the wider network of farmers through field days and workshops.

The Common Market Southeast serves as a key advisor to GA FarmLink and works in partnership to develop strong relationships with relevant USDA agency representatives in the support and development of the farmer cohort and the broader farmer network. Along with hosting farm field days, Common Market Southeast also supports farmers moving along the pathway to wholesale readiness.

In the project's first year, through workshops, farm field days and 1:1 technical assistance, we've worked with more than 100 unique farms, over 70% of which identify as Historically Underserved. We have worked intensively with six farms located across the state and have recruited the next six who will participate alongside peer leaders from the first cohort. This practice of enhancing networks between farm businesses, farm service providers, value chain coordination partners and USDA agencies is growing the connectivity that will grow our future. ♦



**“The GA FarmLink Farm Business Education Program has had a profound impact on my farm's development. The Program provided the tools, knowledge, and network needed to make our farms more efficient, resilient, and profitable.**

**It has opened doors for new market opportunities and partnerships for farmers, while we focus on strategic growth. The educational sessions and interacting with consultants and fellow farmers has expanded our agriculture networks. Connecting with other farmers in the program has created access to a supportive community of peers that will exist for years to come.”**

*-- Hillery Goodgame  
Blue Heron Urban Farm  
& Sanctuary*

*photo courtesy of Hillery Goodgame*

# Holding on to Home

*ALT and the Georgia Mortgage Assistance Program help homeowners in need*

In a lot of ways 2020 feels like another lifetime. But for many Georgia homeowners the financial pressures of the pandemic continue to reverberate. Job and income loss, the complexities of having to care for a loved one, unexpected medical expenses -- we've worked with families for whom some or all of these have equated to missed mortgage payments and an uphill battle to get caught up.

While Georgia ranks near the top third of states for rates of foreclosure, the crisis for homeowners reaches nationwide. The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 created the Homeowner Assistance Fund (HAF), with Georgia receiving over \$200M to provide relief to homeowners who suffered financial hardships due to the pandemic. The Georgia Department of Community Affairs (DCA) administers the funds through the Georgia Mortgage Assistance program, with homeowners able to receive a grant of up to \$50,000.



DCA requires counseling for HAF clients and refers those in our 12-county service area to Athens Land Trust. ALT housing counselors provide housing and financial counseling to applicants and assist them with the application process, which can take eight weeks or longer to complete.

In 2024, the majority of HAF clients are applying for HAF assistance for a second time. For both HAF1 and HAF2 assistance, the client's hardship must directly result from Covid. After counseling the client to determine eligibility, we work closely with clients and DCA to compile and submit documentation to support the homeowner's application.

From there, DCA underwriters approve or deny HAF applications. To help homeowners facing foreclosure to navigate the uncertainty of the process, ALT's housing counselors work with homeowners to review their financial situations, explore available resources, and develop strategies to help them stay in their homes.

"It takes open ears and a strong heart to help people who are dealing with a crisis like the possible loss of their home" says Kai Swaim, the program intake specialist.

Continuing these services is vital as the effects of the pandemic linger even four years on. Through our growing housing counseling program, we remain committed to supporting Georgia homeowners as they work toward lasting stability.

**To schedule an appointment with Athens Land Trust's housing counseling office, call 706-613-0122 or email [kai@athenslandtrust.org](mailto:kai@athenslandtrust.org).**

## Georgia HAF

**\$97,554,078**  
statewide funding available

**10,000**  
homeowners approved

**\$23,000**  
average approval per homeowner

**52**  
HAF clients served by ALT in 2024 with counseling, application guidance, and submission

\*Serving Clarke, Oconee, Morgan, Greene, Oglethorpe, Madison, Elbert, Jackson, Barrow, Walton, Newton and Jasper Counties. Funding is made possible through the Georgia Department of Community Affairs.



**Thank You To Our Partners, Members, and Donors!**

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*How your donation makes a difference*

When you donate to Athens Land Trust, every dollar becomes a gift to our neighbors, helping build a stronger, more equitable community. Here's how your contribution can make a tangible difference:

**\$10:** Covers the cost of an education workshop for a low-income first-time homebuyer, helping to make home ownership more accessible to all.

**\$25:** Supplies one week of fresh produce for a food-insecure family, ensuring that everyone in our community has access to nutritious meals.

**\$50:** Provides essential supplies and materials for a hands-on youth environmental education activity, inspiring the next generation of conservation leaders.

**\$75:** Supplies materials for an on-the-farm workshop, empowering new and beginning farmers with the skills they need to grow food sustainably and strengthen local agriculture.

**\$100:** Equips a Young Urban Builder or Young Conservation Steward with the PPE and tools they need to gain hands-on experience, build their future, and protect our environment.



**\$250:** Funds the construction of one square foot of a permanently affordable home, helping to create stable housing and preserve affordability for generations.

Your support isn't just a donation—it's a gift of hope, opportunity, and empowerment for our community.

As the year comes to a close, your generosity becomes even more impactful. End-of-year giving helps ensure we have the resources to start the new year strong, continuing vital programs and planning for long-term initiatives. Your year-end gift is a way to make a difference in our community where it matters most. Thank you for being a part of our work. ♦

[athenslandtrust.org/donate/](https://athenslandtrust.org/donate/)





**By donating today, you become an Athens Land Trust member. With your support, we can improve quality of life for all and strengthen the fabric of the community through education and the stewardship of land for purposes of affordable housing, conservation, agriculture, and economic development.**

Yes! I want to make a difference in Athens and beyond with a gift of:

\$10    \$25    \$50    \$100

\_\_\_\_\_

\$250    \$500    other amount

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
(as you would like to be acknowledged. Please print)

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Would you like to join our email list?     Yes     No

Would you like to volunteer? Skills or Interests: \_\_\_\_\_

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# Athens Land Trust

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