

# Where the seeds end up

By Heidi Gengenbach, Organizational Coordinator

Getting to know our recipients better—the organizations that receive our produce, and the individuals and families they serve—is one of Gaining Ground’s 2010 initiatives. What better time to start than spring, when we’re sowing the seeds that in a few months will offer up their amazing bounty for harvest and distribution to food pantries and meal programs in Concord and surrounding towns?

To share what we’re learning, in this issue we spotlight one woman whose life and family have been transformed by her involvement with our closest local partner, Open Table.

---

## OPEN TABLE

Concord: Thursdays, 5–6:30 PM,  
First Parish Church

Maynard: Mondays, 5–6:30 PM,  
Union Congregational Church

---

Kampala, Uganda may not be quite the other end of the world from Massachusetts, but it probably feels that way for Salma Semakula and her family—or at least it did, until last summer. A resident of Maynard since 2007, when she moved there from Uganda to join her husband Abasi, Salma began taking her four sons to the community supper and pantry at Open Table in August 2009, after discovering that the weekly program in Maynard and Concord truly was open (“no questions asked”) and warmly welcomed anyone in need.

Salma had hoped that with her Bachelor’s degree in Library & Information Science from Uganda’s Makerere University, she would not have difficulty finding a job to supplement the income Abasi earns as a registered nurse in Waltham. But after two years of struggling with bureaucratic red tape and mounting bills, still unemployed in a town where she knew no one outside her immediate family, Salma didn’t know where to turn for help. Asked how she happened to learn about Open Table at this difficult time, she breaks into a smile:

*It’s a very interesting story I always want to tell! Because I learned of it just last year, and before that, we were suffering, you know, like a normal family of four boys, a husband working, and little money... We took Akrif to [pre]school, and it was expensive. So we looked around for a school that could be cheaper. I went to the Community School [at the UCC]. I remember it was a Monday, it was summertime. When I went there, the lady I talked to, we were talking—and then I smelled food. You know? “Mmm! This is good food, here.” “Oh, yes, there’s good food here, people come every Monday, and everybody is welcome.”*

*Then I had many questions! Will I be allowed in? I told her I have children, so can I bring them? “Oh yes, everybody is welcome.” So I thought, ah, this is—wow. So I went back, brought the boys, and we had such a nice dinner! Jane [Lifton] told me about everything, about Open Table, they also have [it in] Concord, they have groceries, you know? Oh, I was so thrilled.*

Since that day eight months ago, among the approximately 185 guests served by Open Table’s Concord and Maynard programs every week, Salma and her family have found new friendships, a caring community, and nutritious meals and groceries to bridge the food gap until their household is on its feet financially. Thanks in part to Gaining Ground, which donates twenty percent of its produce (about 4,000 lbs.) to Open Table each growing season, that nutritious food includes fresh fruits and vegetables that, at long last, have helped Salma feel more at home. Produce she receives straight from our farm, the same day it’s harvested, reminds her of the agriculture classes she had as a schoolgirl—and of the food her mother grew in the backyard of their Kampala home.

*Open Table has opened my windows—all windows are open! They show you that you’re human, you have kids, you deserve this. And it feels so comforting, that there are people out there who understand, when times are tough.*



(L to R): Abasi Jr. (1), Salma, Axum (8), Akram (10), & Akrif (3)

*Initially, before we started coming to Open Table, I was a little bit, you know—hmm, America is full of processed and tinned food. Back home we don’t have that—we eat fresh food. But when I came to Open Table, oh my, I was surprised! We noticed a lot of vegetables, a table full of vegetables, and you choose whatever you want. I sampled the turnips, and that one with the green and purplish leaves. [GG: Kale, maybe?]. Yes, kale. I washed it, cut it, boiled it, put a little salt... I figured it out our way, from back home.*

*And the beets were in abundance! I used to take them, peel the skins off, boil them, and force the boys to drink them. In the supermarket, it was expensive. So here it was, given out. So I give it to them and say, “Take it, it’s a vitamin.” In the morning everybody was supposed to take a glass!*

*Sometimes they gave us onions, the leafy onions—they’re so good, because we had them back home and I was happy. I saw, oh, these people are serious! I remember those vegetables, all green with the mud on them! I thought, oh, yes, these are my people! That’s why I’m so happy with Open Table—the kind of food they give us, it’s the kind of food I want, healthy food for my children. Open Table, that is my family now.*

For Salma’s sons, the meaning of their family’s connection to Open Table—and, indirectly, to Gaining Ground—is pretty simple. Asked what they like best about the food at Open Table, her second oldest son, Axum, looks up quickly from the Lego set he’s playing with and cries, “Chicken!” Salma’s eldest son Akram tilts his head and replies thoughtfully, “I’d say, everything.”