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She helps bring farm to fork

Organic market worker reconnects people to earth

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STAFF REPORTER

Anne Freeman grew up on a country road north of Kingston, among apple orchards and maple syrup and a vegetable garden she toiled in since the age of 7.



COLIN MCCONNELL/TORONTO STAR

Anne Freeman is the manager of the Dufferin Grove market, where organic farmers sell their goods year-round.

"We didn't pick the corn on the cob until the pot was on the stove to boil the water," the waif-like 46-year-old says, sitting on a wooden bench near the skating rink at Dufferin Grove Park. "You ate the strawberries in June until you couldn't eat another strawberry."

As the manager of the Dufferin Grove Farmers' Market, Freeman works to reconnect people to the earth and the food it gives them. Every Thursday, organic farmers present their goods at the eclectic park, where the smell of baking bread drifts across an ice rink and farmers sort mushrooms beneath mammoth hanging theatre masks. The market runs year-round, and although local food is always preferred, farmers sell some imported produce during the winter to keep the customer stream steady.

Freeman is there with a clipboard, moving tables, talking to farmers and adjusting the welcome sign at the door. But her work does not end there. She also co-ordinates a network of a dozen Toronto farmers' markets, offers advice to start-ups across the city, attends conferences and chats with city officials working on a long-term food strategy.

When she first moved to Toronto in 1995, she found the "feeling of relentless sprawl" crushing. "I really missed the feeling of wild land and agricultural land," she says.

As a contemporary landscape artist and a mother active in community

gardening and planting, Freeman was an early advocate of a farmers' market at Dufferin Grove Park. By 2004, she was managing it. Then eating local and organic became the next big thing, and she found her expertise in demand.

But Freeman is modest about her role at the market and beyond. "It's more the farmers that I feel should be highlighted, really," she says. "They're the ones that are doing the work of growing responsibly, the real land stewards."

In the lead-up to Earth Hour 2009 (8:30 p.m. March 28), the Star presents a series on people leading the way in fighting climate change and caring for the planet. To nominate an Earth Angel, email earthhour@thestar.ca. To sign up to participate in Earth Hour, go to earthhourcanada.com.

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