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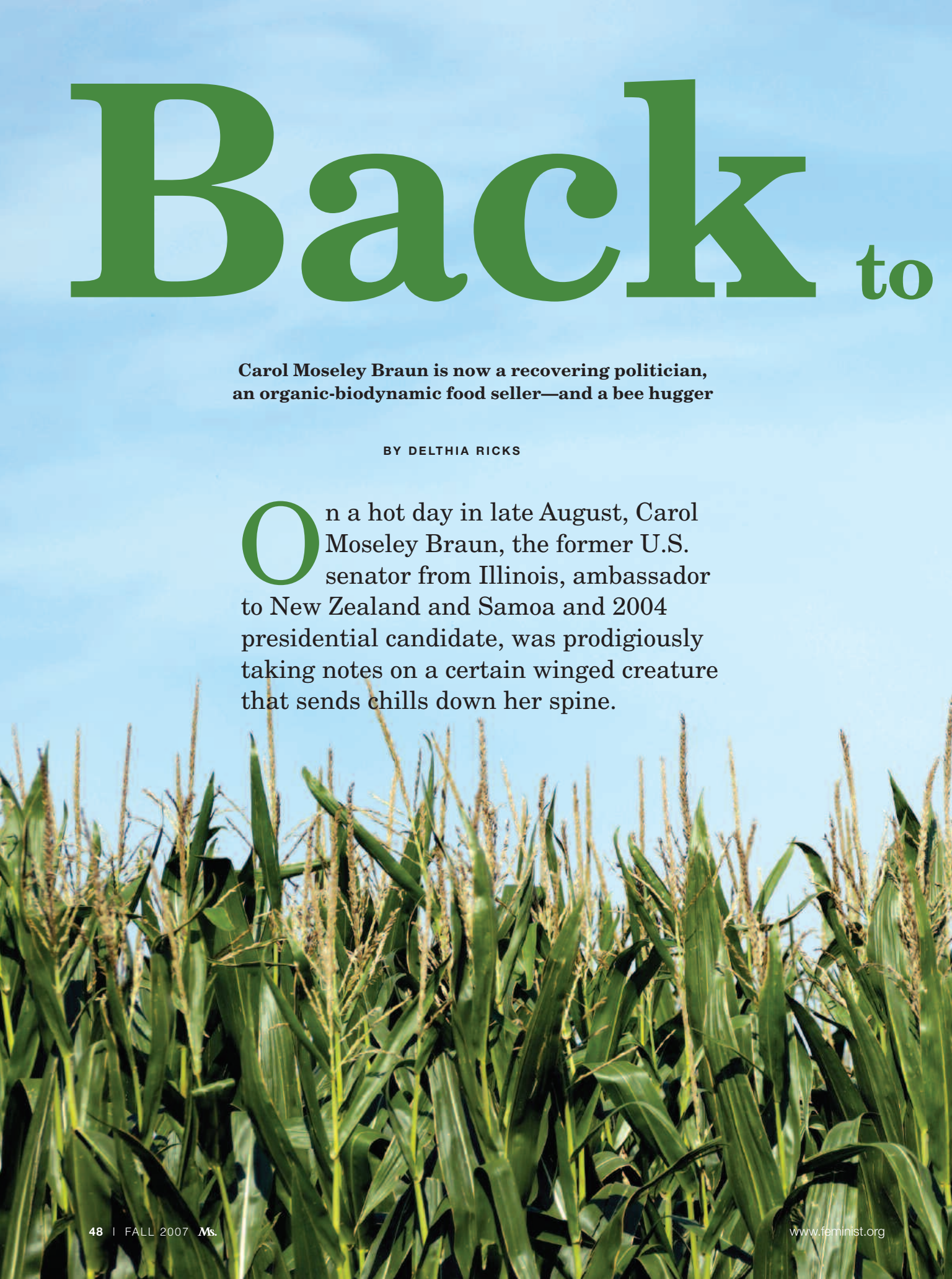
Carol Moseley Braun is now a recovering politician, an organic-biodynamic food seller—and a bee hugger

BY DELTHIA RICKS

On a hot day in late August, Carol Moseley Braun, the former U.S. senator from Illinois, ambassador to New Zealand and Samoa and 2004 presidential candidate, was prodigiously taking notes on a certain winged creature that sends chills down her spine.



the Land

Just as some people are frightened by heights or suffer from claustrophobia, Braun is terrified of bees. Yet she had reasons for closely confronting her fear. For more than a year, honeybees, the pollinating workhorses of American farms and orchards, have been vanishing at an alarming rate. And Braun, who had flown to California specifically to learn about life in the hive, was concerned about the creatures' fate.

Attending the honeybee lecture at Rudolf Steiner College, a small institution nestled in the rolling bluffs near Sacramento, is part of Braun's immersion into the realms of farming, food production and a very special form of organic crop propagation. The bees' plight is important, because she hopes honey will play a role in the organic and biodynamic food company she started in 2005, Ambassador Organics. The enterprise currently markets teas, coffees and spices, commodities that for centuries have reigned at the core of global trade.

What sets Braun's products apart from numerous others crowding grocery shelves worldwide is their connection to biodynamic farming, an agricultural philosophy that grew out of a series of 1923 lectures by Austrian organic-farming expert Rudolf Steiner, namesake of the California college. Steiner believed that the land and its crops are intimately linked to the spiritual forces of the universe. Also a beekeeping expert, he predicted the current honeybee die-off eight decades before billions of bees vanished, forecasting that large-scale commercial beekeeping enterprises would precipitate a sweeping decline.

Now Braun has embraced biodynamics with gusto. It has given her another outlet for her energy now that she has given up politics. "I call myself a recovering politician," Braun, 60, told *Ms.* in a recent interview. "I served in that arena and I've moved on. Sustainability and nutrition: That's where I'm going to make my mark now."

On left: Four generations of Carol Moseley Braun's ancestors gather at their family farm in Union Springs, Ala., around 1898. At far left is her grandmother, in the center her great-great-great grandmother. On right: Ambassador Carol Moseley Braun

She has entered the food industry at a time when many people are increasingly interested not only in what they eat but how the food is grown. Food scares—such as E. coli contamination of spinach and other leafy greens grown on large industrial farms—have created explosive headlines in recent years. Pesticide use on fresh fruits and vegetables is an ongoing concern for consumers as well as farm workers.

Even though Steiner's notions are more than 80 years old, his philosophy of crop propagation is still gaining followers. The Benziger Family Winery, which operates an 85-acre vineyard in Glen Ellen, Calif., for example, proudly promotes its adherence to biodynamic propagation principles. Vineyards and farms elsewhere in the country and abroad are following suit.

"Biodynamics is about being in harmony with the Earth and the universe," says Braun—and no, the practical ex-politician has not lapsed into hippie-era lingo. "Some of the unintended consequences of progress have been the abuses of our bodies and our planet," she continues. "I am convinced that a lot of the health problems that are in epidemic proportions today are directly related to the foods we eat. Obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes and a long list of other medical conditions come from our degraded food supply. That's part of the reason for my getting into biodynamics in the first place, because it emphasizes the nutritional values of foods."

At its core, biodynamic farming goes several steps beyond what most people recognize as organic food production. Instead of simply staying free of chemicals, farmers time when they plant and reap their crops according to Steinerian principles. Seeds, he believed, should be sown in synch with lunar phases and planetary alignments. Harvests likewise should have planetary timing. And seasons, not market forces, should dictate which commodities are available for human consumption. He stressed the importance of avoiding toxic fertilizers and pesticides at all costs, suggesting instead that farmers use insect predators to devour pests that thrive on crops.

Many of Steiner's present-day followers see the biodynamic philosophy as part of the mounting "green" revolution, which emphasizes preservation of Earth's resources and promotion of human and animal health. Experts in biodynamics believe Steiner's methods help "heal" soils stripped of vital minerals. "With organic farming you're still spraying plant-derived chemicals; with biodynamics you're looking to bring a healthy balance to the soil," says staff gardener Natalie Coles of the Josephine Porter Institute for Applied Bio-Dynamics in Woolwine, Va., which markets the herbs and other organic materials Steiner recommended to condition soils.

Braun, who lost her Senate seat to a Republican in 1998 after one term as the first—and still only—African American woman elected to that body, now directs as much energy into her company as once flowed into her campaigns. And there were a number of campaigns in some 30 years of public service: After serving as a prosecutor in the U.S. attorney's office, she was elected Illinois state representative (where she received the honorary title "Conscience of the House"), Cook County Recorder of Deeds and U.S. senator. And then she ran for president. Her new endeavor has consumed so much of her time, though, that she has not been involved in the current Democratic presidential campaigns.

"I like them all. Barack is my neighbor," she said of candidate Obama who won her former Senate seat back for the Democratic party in 2004. "Hillary and I are friends; I adore Joe Biden. And Dennis Kucinich, how could I forget him?"

Her Chicago-based enterprise has already landed its first big coups: Internet grocer Peapod will carry the Ambassador Organics brand, as will organic-fare giant Whole Foods, in its northeast stores. Braun will be making appearances at Whole Foods markets, promoting her

BRAUN: JONATHAN SKOW/CORBIS

line of teas, shade-grown coffees and a range of spices. The products have "organic-biodynamic" notated on their labels.

"We actually [considered marketing] fresh foods and vegetables, but it was difficult starting with perishables," Braun says. "Right now, I am trying to grow the business. That's why we're focusing on nonperishables. Once we get ourselves better established, we plan to get into other foods as well as those that are prepared, which would allow people to take them home to heat."

Braun has to cast a wide net to find suppliers who meet biodynamic standards. She buys spices from Egypt, coffee from Mexico and teas from Sri Lanka.

As head of her own company, Braun has found a new forum in which to legislate and impose rules. Her company employs the "triple bottom line," emphasizing environmental sustainability, social justice and corporate accountability. She insists on fair trade, emphasizing decent salaries and sanitary conditions for workers who produce the foods she sells. And those who know Braun well are optimistic that she will succeed despite fierce competitiveness in the food industry.

"From a business standpoint she has turned a corner. And hopefully from here on out it will be easier," says Lloyd Wright, a member of Braun's board of directors, who worked for 38 years in the U.S. Department of Agriculture and directed the agency's Office of Civil Rights during 1997 and 1998, under Clinton. "Getting an agreement to sell in Whole Foods, the largest of the chains that sell organic, was really important. Like any developing business, hers is going through some growing pains. But she's out there getting a brand started, getting a supply line going and getting her brand known."

Braun didn't enter the food industry as a hobby. The native Chicagoan's family roots run deep into Alabama farmland, where more than 300 acres of virgin soil in Union Springs has remained untouched by chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Planted with pecan trees, the land has been in her family since 1870 and has served as a symbol of her green Earth focus.

Now that the land has been handed down to her generation, she is restoring the ailing trees in order to preserve the farm for her retirement and for future generations. Braun's son, Matthew, 30, already sits on her board of directors and helps his mother with the new endeavor.

"There are two threads in life that came together," leading to a role in the food industry, she tells *Ms.* As a senator, Braun helped develop agriculture and nutrition bills; as a child, she spent many hours on the family farm. Both experiences, she says, helped forge her interest in chemical-free farming. As a girl in the 1950s she'd observe with interest as her grandparents used compost as fertilizer.

But Braun interrupted the bucolic image with a sharp reality check of Alabama in the early 1950s. Visiting the Deep South during trips from Illinois meant witnessing sharp racial divisions imposed by Jim Crow—the unwritten doctrine that ruled Dixie. She vividly recalls drinking fountains governed by signs reading "white" and "colored."

Today, Braun is concerned that the food supply is becoming divided between food for the affluent and food "ghettos" for the poor. Residents there sometimes have to travel miles to find a head of lettuce, let alone more-nutritious vegetables. It is no accident that obesity and diabetes abound in communities where fast food and highly processed fare predominate. As her company grows, Braun hopes to market vitamin-rich fresh vegetables and make sure they reach poor communities.

Joan Levin, a retired lawyer with a graduate degree in public health who has known Braun since the two were in law school 38 years ago, says the former senator is putting a familiar face and a widely recognized name on the philosophy of biodynamics.

"This is a topic of mounting interest," says Levin, who herself has had a decadeslong interest in natural foods. "People are concerned about the quality of food they eat and how it's grown and the human capital that is used to produce it. These are issues that Carol's addressing. She has a deep understanding of farming and the land. She has been interested in health, so this brings together many interests of hers. Any new venture is very risky, but I think she's very brave."

Braun, who served as ambassador to New Zealand between 1999 and 2001, says she also learned about living close to the land from New Zealand's Maori culture. The Maoris' deep spirituality provided yet another view of how harmony with Earth—and the cosmos—affects well-being. She's convinced that consuming foods based on a radically different farming philosophy can positively affect public health.

"There are so many things that I'm interested in. I can't do everything or solve every problem," Braun says. "What I can do is find my niche and master one part of this big problem. If I can make a few things even marginally better, then I will have accomplished a lot." ■

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