Community Garden’s HOMEGROWN Project Awarded $77,505 Grant

by Susan Richardson
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Three years ago, Goodwill’s Community Garden Partnership and the Salvation Army of the Fox Cities teamed up to address issues related to “good food” access and food security. Now, thanks to a recent grant, the HOMEGROWN project has the necessary funding to expand its efforts within the Fox Cities community.

Community Gardens and the local Salvation Army were notified just before the holidays that our HOMEGROWN project was awarded a two-year collaborative grant of $77,505 from the Basic Needs Giving Partnership Fund within the Community Foundation for the Fox Valley Region supported by the U.S. Venture Fund for Basic Needs, the J.J. Keller Foundation and other community partners. The purpose of the grant is to expand this pilot program to reach more low-income people.

The HOMEGROWN project begins with people – people and organizations committed to working together to strengthen food security and the overall skill development of low- to moderate-income individuals and families from the Fox Cities, including those who currently use the Salvation Army’s food pantry.

Our long-term goal is to make participants aware of the importance of food security and to address their empowerment through activities such as growing, harvesting, preparing and preserving food. As we work with participants toward self-sufficiency related to food, there will be opportunities for them to participate in their own well-being – which plays a central role by sharing their experiences, knowledge and skills with the broader Community. Focus groups and interviews will be conducted that will enable them to inform us how to facilitate dialogue about an issue that is of concern to us all. It will also help us reframe the conventional images of poverty by engaging participants in volunteer and teaching opportunities.

The HOMEGROWN project includes knowledge and awareness building around food security, as well as the community building that will sustain the changes in how people access and secure good food. We are using well-recognized strategies by encouraging the development of human capital (social bonding), while combining the bricks and mortar component by building gardens and growing food. We hope to further strengthen this work by providing education for the development of cottage industries related to food.

We are building on the strengths of individual community partners and our participants by starting with local conditions and an understanding that there is no cookie-cutter approach to poverty and current economic trends. The best efforts actually come from local capacities, traditions and assets. This project fosters broader community participation by enabling the people we serve (or those who are referred to us) to participate in the development of programs and policies that will be led by them. Examples include changes in the food pantry program, building gardens and teaching others how to preserve the food they grow, and developing a broader interaction with fellow participants.

To illustrate how this project can impact others, I’d like to share a story from a woman named Rita, who discovered how her involvement with Community Garden Partnership could change not only her life but also the lives of others.

Rita admits she’s uncomfortable talking with people she doesn’t know, but she seized the chance this summer to interact with people outside of St. Joseph’s Food Pantry and tell them about the Community Garden program and its nearby garden. What prompted her to take this step was the
overabundance of lettuce, kale, spinach and mustard leaf that needed to be harvested from that garden. Her initial thought was to take some home and to give some to a friend, but when she realized how much food there was, she decided it should go to St. Joseph’s Food Pantry instead.

“An older gentleman from St. Joe’s was walking another gentleman outside, and so I decided to ask him if they had any bags because I wanted to donate some items from the garden,” Rita said. “He seemed delighted, went inside and gave me a bunch of one-gallon bags, which were perfect.

“I enjoyed harvesting the food and making mixed salad bags with the variety of things growing in the garden,” she said. “After filling seven bags, I thought I saw the gentleman who gave me the bags again outside, so I went and offered him a bag of mixed salad greens. Although it was a different man than I had thought, he was just as delighted. His name was Bob, and he was the supervisor of St. Joe’s. He said we are doing a great job and also said thank you.”

Rita decided she wanted to hand out the rest of the produce to the food pantry participants herself – along with a Community Garden Partnership flyer. “It sounded like a great way for people to see the garden, hear about the garden, and later on taste the garden,” she said. “Perhaps it would spark some interest.”

With the bags in hand, Rita found the courage to approach six people she didn’t know to give out the remaining produce. After doing this a few times, she realized it wasn’t that difficult, especially when she saw how happy people were to receive her gifts of food.

“Seven bags of salad greens felt like a great accomplishment for myself and for the garden,” Rita said proudly. “I am not sure if I breathed at all during the whole time, but it was a great experience either way.”

For more information about Goodwill’s Community Garden Partnership or the HOMEGROWN project, contact me at (920) 832-5119 or e-mail Susan.Richardson@ces.uwex.edu