

Grow Our Own: Building Peace through Community Gardens

Chinnel Williams' Final Project for PEAC 325

Main Goal

My main focus is to organize a community garden in the West End of Louisville that will provide more accessible healthy foods in an effort to combat food insecurity and reduce violent conflict in an extremely impoverished neighborhood.

Why?

During the first semester of the 2016 Fall semester school year I did a lot of research on environmental racism in the city of Louisville and the extreme living conditions faced by the residents of the West End of Louisville. While doing that research, I discovered that there is a non-coincidental relationship between food insecurity and violent conflict. The neighborhoods that are more than 8 miles away from access to nutritional foods are the same neighborhoods with high rates of violent crimes and conflict. Samuel Raskin, from the Louisville Community Farm Alliance, did a research on the food insecurity in the West End of Louisville and East Downtown Louisville. His findings showed that the residents have easier access to fast food joints than to supermarkets with healthy produce for the people that live in those areas of Louisville. His study also showed that 79 percent of the people that live in those areas are African American. These statistics were beyond startling and also sparked my interest in researching the relationship between food insecurity and violent conflicts. Prior to organizing the community garden, I learned that neighborhoods with higher populations of African-American people were the neighborhoods with high rates of violent crimes and conflict. So, I pondered on the theory that if these neighborhoods were provided access to healthier foods and the aesthetic

of their neighborhoods were changing, potentially this could be the answer to violence prevention as opposed to increasing the amount of police officers in these areas. At the first interest meeting that was held for the community garden, prospective members brainstormed ideas for community events that could be held at the garden and ways in which we could encourage neighbors of the garden location to get involved in building their community. This sparked a fire in me and I realized that creating this garden would not only be beneficial to the actual garden members but also to the community where the garden is located. I've heard of gardens in other parts of Louisville, but as I drove around the West End of Louisville and saw abandoned house after abandoned house and Krogers being closed down left and right, I realized that families can't raise their children on chips, candy, and soda pop. This inspired me to build peace and community through reclaiming autonomy of the foods we are feeding our families and changing the aesthetic based on the needs of the people. Dietary habits are instrumental in how people behave. These communities are subjected to extreme conditions and there is a direct correlation between poor dietary habits and aggressive or violent behaviors. Dr. Lynn Toddman's study connected the dots between food insecurity and violence in communities in the city of Chicago. She told some of the community members she was working with that they needed to eat more and one member responded, "It's the food that's killing us" When I read that, it changed my life forever.

What?

Essentially, the Community Garden will be collective organizing rather than a hierarchical, control and command leadership. This garden would provide the opportunity for people to work with their neighbors and community members in order to satisfy their personal needs and wants, but also the needs and wants of the community at-large. The initial start-up process of the garden

consisted of trying to get people interested in getting involved, applying for a grant from Louisville Grows, and also building and retrieving the supplies necessary to grow and distribute our produce. Some events that we brainstormed for the garden were:

- Picnics
- Barbeques
- Canning and Selling food to people outside the community
- How-to-Garden Sessions for Maupin Elementary students
- How-to-Garden Sessions for Adults that want to start their own gardens
- Recipe Sharing events
- Block Parties on Hemlock Street (the location of the garden)
- Yoga Sessions at the Garden

Some ideas we've also brainstormed would be to package some of our produce and give some food away to the neighbors who are not garden members, hire ex-felons or juvenile delinquents to water, cut, and cleanup the garden, and also creating roles in order share the responsibilities that will be necessary to maintain the garden.

Some of the roles that were created are:

- Garden Leader Group
- Leadership Team (Secretary)
- Treasurer
- Garden Expert
- Plot Coordinator
- Grounds Team
- Composting Team

- Events Team
- Communications Team
- Outreach Team
- Security

This garden will be a space for building. We will be building raised beds, sheds, benches, protection for plants; but we will also be building peace, love, character, and community. This garden will also be a space for growing. We will grow tomatoes, lettuce, flowers, basil, and parsley; but we will also grow as individual people through the commitment and dedication to not only the maintenance of the garden but to the beneficiaries of the garden. We are aware that not everyone will be able to grow or be a member of the garden, but everyone in the community will be able to benefit from the garden.

Who?

Everyone is welcomed to join the community garden. However, most of the members will be African American people because of the location of the garden. The garden lot is located on Hemlock and Dumesnil Street in the West End of Louisville. This location was chosen intentionally and was provided by one of the members in the community. The lot being in the West End provided us the opportunity to better achieve our goals and reach out to the people we felt were most in need of easier access to healthier foods. The garden will have a plot per family or group but it will also have a plot that is simply for people in the community who may not be garden members but can benefit from the food being grown there. There has been discussion of distributing those foods to the neighbors of the community or putting up signs that say “this food is for anyone” and allowing people the opportunity to still benefit without participation. This is

also a safe space for people of color in this particular community. People who want to participate or contribute that are not people of color may do so, but they must know their role in the garden as an ally. This will require them to prioritize the needs of the people in this community.

Who are the Connectors and Dividers?

The major connector for the community garden will be the community, of course! Community gardens more often than not are funded by either the members in the community or community oriented organizations. So the main entity that will be deciding the longevity of the garden will be the members of the garden. This is shown in the startup process when having to decide roles and responsibilities. All of the garden members are not only responsible for their own plots but also for holding other garden members accountable for their maintenance as well. Another connector will be the garden itself. The interest in creating the space has already brought so many people together, but the garden will be a safe space for people to commune and fellowship with one another while also changing the aesthetic of the neighborhood.

A potential divider may be time. Time is not a concept you often think of as preventing the building of peace, but in this instance time plays a huge role. Most of the plants and items that will be grown will take time to bud, sprout, blossom, and bloom. They also require a significant amount of maintenance. So, if garden members are not taking the time out of every week to check up on their specific plots and other parts of the garden that may need care, then the garden will not be sustainable for its purposes. There may also be an issue with the landowner, who could potentially be another divider. Although we have made an agreement verbally and on paper, the landowner could decide that they no longer want the garden on their lot; this means that we would lose the garden. However, we have taking precautionary actions by creating a Land Use Agreement that the owner will sign.

Which Community Organization Will I Partner With?

We have already partnered up with Louisville Grows to get the Community Garden Start-Up grant they provide. We applied and have been given the grant. This relationship with Louisville Grows has already been a positive one in such a short period of time. Louisville Grows is an organization that works with communities to start their own gardens and also provides other growing-oriented resources. They have already provided us with the materials to build the raised beds for our garden. We've also been able to get compost and starter plants for the garden through Louisville Grows. In September, we will have to provide a follow-up report of how our garden has progressed to Louisville Grows. However, there will be more materials and resources we will need that they cannot provide. So, we've also partnered up with various white allies to help with providing the rest of our resources and materials.

How Will This Group Interact With Existing Groups?

There are other community gardens in the city of Louisville. There are even a couple in the West End of Louisville, but these gardens were created by people who are not a part of those communities and they don't have programs implemented to help people in the community that are not members of the garden. This is why we have brainstormed ways in which we can involve people in the community that are not able to actually participate in the gardening process. Some of the things we have thought of are:

- Creating "We Care" packages that will consist of produce from the garden
- A program that allows for people to get volunteer hours by working at the garden with members

- Workshops on the basics of gardening to teach the community how to grow their own foods
- Monthly community events to counteract the communal violence and lack of fellowship that overwhelms these communities.

We hope that through these ideas and others that we've brainstormed we will be able to provide more to this particular community than they are currently receiving.

How Much Will It Cost?

The cost is not established because there will be ongoing needs for the garden and future events that will happen at the garden. However, we have obtained resources that will be able to provide the monetary needs of the garden. Through some of my friends that organize in the community I've been able to build a relationship with a few white allies that are willing to provide monetary resources for the sustainability of our garden. In order for our Treasury team to be able to thoroughly keep track of our funds we needed to open a bank account. So, we've also registered our group of members as a non-profit organization as the first step in becoming a 501(c) 3. We now are able to put member fees, donations, and grant money in this bank account. We hope to also be able to get accepted for more community-oriented grants through our new status.

When?

- February 2017
 - Find out who is interested?
 - Brainstorm resources needed
 - Find a meeting space (This was obtained through the Mayor's Office of Safe and Healthy Neighborhoods)

- Get a Louisville Grows representative to come to the meeting and explain the process
- March 2017
 - Apply for the Louisville Grows grant
 - Look for garden location
 - Get interested people to sign garden application
 - Find a Garden Expert to help with the actual growing process
 - Research growing seasons for the different plans
 - Research resources need to sustain garden
 - Create guidelines for the garden
- April 2017
 - Reach out to neighbors of the garden to get involved
 - Build raised beds for the garden
 - Organize plots for members
 - Collect garden member/plot fees
 - Get starter plants and seeds
 - Find monetary sources
 - Open a bank account
 - Register as non-profit organization
 - Brainstorm future events and programs at the garden
- May 2017
 - Plan fundraiser events
 - Start growing

- Create ways to collect and store produce
- Beautify the Garden (benches, fire pits, archways, etc)
- “We Care” packages!
- June 2017
 - Start having events at the garden every two weeks in the summer
 - Block parties
 - Picnics
 - Barbeques
 - Yoga
- July 2017
 - Collect and store produce
 - Collect materials for composting
 - Fruits and vegetable peels
 - Egg shells
 - Coffee grounds
 - Brainstorm ideas for sustaining the garden in the Winter
 - Find a location for indoor gardening in the winter
- August 2017
 - Begin finishing off growing season
 - Start transitioning to indoor garden
- September 2017
 - Send follow-up report to Louisville Grows
- October - December 2017

- Indoor gardening and composting
- Future Months to Come:
 - Continue to grow our own foods and reclaim autonomy over our dietary habits

Where?

The Garden is located on Hemlock Street across from Maupin Elementary. We have all of our meetings there and if the weather is not permitting then we will meet at California Community Center in a room given to us by the Mayor's office of Safe and Healthy Neighborhoods.

What Are The Obstacles?

The biggest obstacle will be the weather. Growing your own produce strongly depends on the environment conditions to cooperate. We are all learning together as we move along in the process. It will take a lot of research and trial and error for us to sustain the garden yearly. Other than the weather, I don't foresee any real obstacles because we have built meaningful relationships with people who are able to provide us with the resources we will need for the garden to thrive.

Can My Good Intentions Make Things Worse?

I don't see our good intentions making anything worse because we have made precautionary actions to ensure that, that doesn't happen. Prior to choosing a location we went around to each house in the community and Maupin Elementary to see if people would be opposed to having a community garden in their neighborhood. We have actually been receiving a lot of positive feedback from the neighbors and they have expressed relief in the fact that people that look like them are investing in their communities in ways that they can benefit from.

What Are The Expected Outcomes?

We expect to create a safe space for people of color to be able not only provide nutritional foods for their families but also commune and beautify their community. We also hope to help with providing more ways to constructively channel aggression and violent behaviors. Through our volunteer programs and reaching out to people that live in the community we are showing interest in people where others may have not. More often than not, people don't like to feel as if though they are receiving a handout. So, through creating this space we are able to allow people to reclaim autonomy over their food supply and also build character and community with people that look like them.

Finally, How Does This Relate to Peace Studies?

To organize a garden based on individual and communal needs is a durable form of positive peace. This garden will provide a place of mutual commitment to battling food insecurity and community violence. The garden will give members of these communities an opportunity to reclaim autonomy over their own health and safety. Peacebuilding requires finding non-violent ways to reduce or prevent violence. We have provided an affordable way to change your dietary habits that will reduce aggressive and violent behaviors. The garden will also serve as a tool in the community to show that there is positivity in tragic circumstances.

Sources

Raskin, Samuel. "Why It's Easier to Get a Burger than Broccoli on West Broadway:." *Community Farm*

Alliance (2006): n. pag. Web. 10 Apr. 2017.

Varga, Mary Pat, and Jill Stewart. "Connecting the Dots between Food Deserts & Urban Violence." *CoLab*

Radio RSS. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 Apr. 2017. <<http://colabradio.mit.edu/connecting-the-dots-between-food-deserts-urban-violence/>>.