



Victor Rivera - gardener

Creating Change: Groundwork Lawrence

by Leigh Vincola

At one time, Lawrence, Massachusetts was one of the region's most prosperous mill cities with enough textile jobs and wealth to sustain a healthy population. The brick architecture situated along the Merrimack River and the historic Great Stone Dam hint at the city's past, but the present day Lawrence is a different place.

Today it is one of the most economically depressed areas in the state. Some 31% of families (mostly immigrants from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico) live below the poverty level. This fact directly relates to the poor health of Lawrence's residents, whose rate of hunger is 6% higher than the state average.

Recently I had the opportunity to speak with members of Groundwork Lawrence (GWL), a non-profit organization that is working to improve the overall health and sustainability of life in Lawrence. GWL acknowledges that environmental problems not only impact the landscape of a town or city, but also have great social and health implications.

Through their programs, GWL is trying to protect and maintain the physical environment of the city and also the physical well being of their citizens. This can be achieved through a focus on nutrition and the importance of providing fresh, local produce to a community where it really matters.

Rose Gonzales, GWL's program manager, is aware that there are many programs out there that bring food to people in need but says she is "more concerned with what is actually being put into their bellies." She continues to explain that while foods like condensed milk and canned vegetables might satiate ones hunger; they do not do much to address ongoing health issues that are prevalent in poorer communities like Lawrence.

And so Groundwork Lawrence has set out to radically change the quality of food available to its residents. In the past three years, the organization has created a network of community gardens, established a city farmers market and is now collaborating with a farmer who provides CSA shares exclusively to the people who live and work in Lawrence.

THE COMMUNITY GARDENS

There are three main community sites with active gardeners who grow vegetables and flowers in clean, amended soil provided by GWL. Each site restricts the use of pesticides and encourages organic growing practices by offering workshops on topics such as pest management and composting.

The first of these gardens is the Brooks Street Garden, which is part of a city owned, collaboratively designed park set next to the Spicket River, an area that was once an industrial laundry facility. Funds from the EPA helped clean up the land and build 17 raised beds. One of these beds is cared for by GWL's youth group, the Green Team, a year-round program for teens that instills environmental stewardship through service learning projects, field studies and leadership training.

Up the road at the Union & Mechanic Street garden, nine gardeners tend to an "alleyway garden" which incorporates storm water management through Low-Impact Development design. When I visited, both gardens had just been planted, and the young crops were awaiting the sun, rain and careful attention the community gardeners will give them all season.

Community gardening is just that—an activity that builds community, and in Lawrence many of the growers are long-time neighbors that met for the very first time while tending to their plants. The gardeners are old and young, experienced and not, yet they are all enthusiastic for one reason or another about growing food and flowers for themselves and their families. Gonzales explained that many residents are drawn to the gardens to reconnect to an agricultural lifestyle they knew back home, or to learn farming traditions that have been lost through the generations. Some just garden for the sense of peace it brings them. Gardener Tamara Trejo says she is just happy to "connect with the cycles of nature and escape from the concrete and asphalt that permeate my daily routines."

SCHOOL YARD GARDEN

Set at the Leonard Middle School, GWL's schoolyard garden is an important part of the school's nutrition and exercise program, Eat Right, Move More. The program started in January with classes in physical education and making healthy food choices. The students stared out sketching and planning a garden site, and in the spring the classroom transitioned outside to begin planting. The group of ten middle schoolers delighted in getting their hands dirty and learning what bean, squash and tomato plants actually looked liked. Over the course of the summer the garden will be maintained by two members of this group, named "garden stewards," who have shown particular interest in the garden as well as GWL's Green Team.

In addition to these three gardens, Groundwork Lawrence has developed four other alleyways into community gathering spots with flower gardens and painted wall murals with the aim to keep the areas safe and clean of rubbish.

Gonzales explained that these alleyways can be complicated to manage because "nobody wants to claim ownership or responsibility over them." The city doesn't want them, insisting that the residents who abut the alleys own them. But in Lawrence, owner occupancy rates are so low and renters come and go with such frequency that there is little long-term investment from the closest neighbors. One gardener at the Union & Mechanic Street garden complained to Gonzales during my visit that some of her plants had been damaged by what she assumed to be vandals or people just being disrespectful of her property. Gonzales admits that behavior from some neighbors can be a challenge, but over time she has seen interest spread from the gardens, outward into the community.

THE FARMERS MARKET

On July 2nd the Groundwork Lawrence farmers market opens for its third season. The market, in the center of downtown, has four dedicated vendors: Boston Hill Farm in Andover, Brox Farm in Dracut, Riverdale Farm in Groton and Visouth Kim, a Lawrence resident who rents an acre of land in Lowell to grow Asian greens.

For GWL, the establishment of a farmers market also means developing very deliberate relationships with the city's WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) office in order to make the produce as accessible as possible to everyone. Managed by the Food and Nutrition Service, WIC is a federal program that protects the health of low-income women and young children who are at nutritional risk by providing supplemental foods and health information.

GWL advertises the market in the city WIC office, and

reciprocally WIC has set up a vendor table on market days. Lawrence is one of the two markets in the state that operates a wireless EBT machine where shoppers can redeem WIC coupons. Last season, these sales totaled \$33,000, the highest in the state for farmers markets.

The Lawrence DTA (Department of Transitional Assistance, formerly known as Welfare) office has been a bit less responsive to GWL, but Gonzales is confident that they are making the right connections with the organization and that a productive partnership will blossom in time.

THE CSA

Gonzales was especially excited to tell me about Groundwork's CSA program. Begun as a pilot program in 2007, the CSA was met with such great success that it has doubled in size to 120 members for this season. Farmer Dave from Brox Farm (also a market vendor) is the CSA grower while GWL manages the program.

Gonzales and the team at Groundwork Lawrence have worked very hard this spring to ensure that the CSA shares are distributed to families and individuals who will benefit from the weekly supply of produce. Partnerships with other non-profits in the community will help to achieve this.

Lawrence CommunityWorks, an organization also working to improve the quality of life in Lawrence, will take 30 CSA shares of which 28 will be 70% subsidized, and, in exchange for help with distribution, two individuals will receive shares at no cost.

Neighbors in Need, a local organization that serves food pantries, will receive a few CSA shares for distribution among the pantries each week. In addition, they will be given any shares not claimed at the end of pick-up days. Some of the full paying members have also donated money to further subsidize shares.

Many of us are fortunate enough to make food choices based on our taste, health concerns and environmental philosophy. We are lucky for this. Unfortunately a large number of the residents in Lawrence base their food choices on their level of hunger and the amount of money in their pocket. Often quantity comes first, quality second. With the help of Groundwork Lawrence, there is now the opportunity to change this. In just three years, the Lawrence community has seen a major increase in the access to fresh, nutritious foods and is learning about the positive impact on the overall health of their city. ♦

www.groundworklawrence.org

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