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Urban Roots

Good food, good work, good citizens

By Kate Thornberry

Urban Roots is a local nonprofit that combines sustainable agriculture with youth development, and it works. Not just for the teenagers involved but for the entire Austin community. This afterschool program addresses real problems of food insecurity and parity and deftly forges new solutions by combining energy, idealism, and elbow grease.

Access to fresh, high-quality, organic produce is scarce in our poorer neighborhoods and nonexistent for the truly needy: the elderly, the homebound, and the homeless. Childhood obesity has risen as fewer families have time for home-cooked meals, and to make things worse, most Americans have a serious disconnect regarding where their food comes from and how much nutrition it actually contains. As parents struggle to work increasingly long hours for paychecks with less buying power, our communities have become fractured as well: Very few have time or energy to get to know, let alone help, their neighbors. And every year, a new crop of high school graduates is dumped on the job market lacking many of the life skills necessary to thrive.

The Urban Roots program tackles this whole range of issues in a seamless and synergistic way. In a nutshell, local teens from all over Austin work an acre of land as an afterschool job, acquiring life-changing skills in cooperation, commitment, entrepreneurship, public speaking, self-confidence, and nutrition.

A full 40% of what they grow is donated to local relief organizations, providing high-quality, vitamin-rich food to populations who desperately need it, as well as introducing the young people to the rewards of community service. The remaining 60% of what they grow is sold by the teens at area farmers' markets, providing local, affordable, organic produce to the city at large. And the money made on sales goes to pay the teenagers a fair hourly wage for their hard work, and in the process, the kids learn about handling money, customer service, and small business.

Most important of all, these kids get to make a dramatic and positive impact on problems of access and nutrition that more than a few adults have given up on as "unsolvable" and "just the way it is." To feel that you have the power to address big problems in meaningful ways, especially at that age, is transformative.

The Urban Roots program is the brainchild of Max Elliot and Mike Evans. Evans came to Austin four years ago with a degree in African-American studies and a boatload of experience working with urban youth, primarily with Boston's renowned Food Project (www.thefoodproject.org), which he ran for five years. Elliot hails from Shreveport, La., and his résumé contains most of the farming know-how, especially concerning farming in our blisteringly hot (and largely arid) climate. The two met while Evans

was doing some volunteer work at a local organic farm, and their mutual interest in both sustainable agriculture and social work drew them together.

"Some people have a choice and can buy the fresh, organic produce," says Evans. "But many don't have that choice for various reasons: low income, lots of kids, or lack of access. You are cut out of that healthy, nutritious food, or else you have to make a very tough decision, like not having a phone versus buying food that is better for your family. That's a crazy decision to have to make."

The two men discussed solutions to this and other challenges and kept in touch. Two or three years later, Elliot was hired by local umbrella organization Youthlaunch to oversee Webb Middle School's gardening program. Elliot felt that the program didn't allow the students enough investment in the outcome of their efforts, so he invited Evans to brainstorm with him. Elliot thought that Youthlaunch might be convinced to sponsor a program similar to the Food Project, where working with urban teens could be combined with teaching sustainable-farming practices. For months the two men hashed out their ideas, and they came up with the Urban Roots concept. Eventually, Youthlaunch hired Evans on as a temporary advisor, and the nonprofit project was given the green light.

Evans and Elliot were able to lease an acre of good farmland from Hands of the Earth, a farm close to Eastside Memorial High School at the Johnston Campus. They began accepting applications from teenagers all over Austin for the afterschool and weekend jobs Urban Roots was offering and got about 50 applications for the 15 positions.

"I wish we could have hired all of them," rues Evans. "But we hadn't even had a harvest yet, and we couldn't overcommit ourselves."

Because Urban Roots is a bona fide job, the program can serve a more diverse group of kids. "The fact that we pay people, it levels the playing field," explains Evans. "Kids who need to spend their time at a paying job aren't pushed out. Some kids come for one reason and some for other reasons, but over time, their goals become similar."

The first day of work was a Saturday in February, when Elliot, Evans, and the crew of teens broke ground for planting. Christopher Matthews, a sophomore at LBJ, reminisces: "I will never forget that first day! It was freezing and raining ... I knew we were going to get dirty, but man! We had, like, *piles of mud* stuck to our feet!" No one had rain gear, so the kids wore black garbage bags as ponchos. When asked if that first day gave him second thoughts, the soft-spoken linebacker looks confused. "No ... not at all," he smiles. "Actually, it was fun!"

Along with learning to work together to get all the tomato seedlings planted, all the spinach harvested, and other specific, time-sensitive goals, the Urban Roots kids attend workshops aimed at education and personal growth. Because Urban Roots is usually a teen's first job, there's a workshop on money management, as well as a necessary workshop on insect management. Taking time to sit in silence and solitude, to connect with the forces and cycles of nature, is the focus of one lesson; to connect with the meaning and rhythms of music is the focus of another.

Public speaking has turned out to be an essential workshop, as many of the Urban Roots kids have been called on to appear on television or speak at gatherings about the program. "I used to be the shyest, quietest person in the class," says Veronica Garcia, a sophomore at LBJ. "But now I speak up all the time. Urban Roots helped me to calm down and be more comfortable around people. Used to be I would never raise my hand, *even if I had the answer*. After being on TV, speaking up in class ... no problem!"

During the six-month pilot phase of the program, the 15 Urban Roots kids grew a whopping 18,000 pounds of organic produce – on *1 acre*. All in all, they raised beans, beets, cabbage, carrots, collard greens, cucumbers, eggplant, basil, cilantro, melons, lettuce, okra, onions (bulb and bunching), black-eyed peas, sweet peppers, hot peppers, potatoes, spinach, summer squash, tomatillos, turnips, and tomatoes (slicing and cherry); 7,200 pounds of their fresh produce was donated to local relief

organizations Caritas, Capital Area Food Bank, Meals on Wheels and More, Spring Terrace, Manos de Cristo, Casa Marianella, and SafePlace. The remaining 10,650 pounds were sold at farmers' markets and to local community-supported agriculture services and restaurants. The Urban Roots teens manned tables at both the Downtown Austin Farmers' Market and the Montopolis WIC Clinic. "People really loved our tomatoes," Christopher beams. "I was happy when people told us, 'Your vegetables are great!' It makes you really proud."

There is no substitute for the pride and self-reliance that comes from growing your own food; the vegetables you pull from the ground or off the vine yourself have a savor unlike any other. The teenagers get to take home as much produce as they want, and a lot of kids discover that they now enjoy vegetables more than they thought possible.

"The organic carrots we grew, they were so sweet; you could just eat them right out of the ground," remembers Vivian Alston, a junior at LBJ. "I didn't used to eat raw spinach, but I look forward to it now."

Local chefs including Jack Gilmore, Angela ShelfMedearis, Howard Kells, and Brian Hay volunteered to teach cooking workshops, making unfamiliar vegetables less intimidating. "I had never tasted squash or beets before Urban Roots," laughs Veronica. "You know how when you go to taste something new, you hesitate, like, am I going to like it? You *hesitate*. It was like that for me at the cooking workshop, with beets. But then I just fell in love with them! And then I thought, what else do you have?"

The nutrition workshop had a big impact on all the kids, and they took what they learned there home to their families. "They showed us how much fat is in a Big Mac, and I thought, 'Oh my god, that is *so nasty!*'" continues Veronica. "I went home and told my family everything, especially about how much sugar is in one can of soda."

For Vivian Alston, the money-management workshop proved the most helpful. "I already knew a lot about eating healthy," she says. "But I didn't know anything about handling money. We earned over \$2,500 over the course of the program, so they had a woman from the bank come out and show us how to budget, how to save, and how to open a checking account. She taught us about taxes, and we discussed what we wanted to do with our money; it was really informative. I just got my driver's license, and now I've started saving up for a car – and for gas and insurance."

Evans stresses that while the kids learn about farming, they also learn much more. "What we are trying to do in our program, we are teaching kids, yes, how to farm, but we are also teaching how to work hard. How to be responsible, and what does commitment mean? Our kids have to commit to work from February to July. That's a long time in a kid's life!"

Evans' eyes grow serious and earnest as he explains. "They get a chance to learn entrepreneurial skills and overcome learned helplessness. We don't expect them to become farmers; if they learn about farming and can become advocates for the environment and for farming later on, that's great. We want them to say: 'I am going to learn about all of this and keep it in my mind, but also learn these interpersonal skills so I have *convincing* skills when I apply for a job. I'll have *convincing* skills when I go to college.' If you are able to present yourself confidently, it makes a huge difference."

Both Vivian and Christopher are hoping to come back and work at Urban Roots next year, but only three of the 15 current students are eligible to come back. The program needs to benefit as many teens as possible, and there are only 15 spots, total. Evans and Elliot have managed to budget for three returning "assistant crew leaders," but the remaining positions must be filled with newcomers.

"If we only had more land," says Evans, "we could rehire every kid from last year and expand, as well. The program has been such a huge success. We would love to hire all the teenagers who are interested. If we could get an inexpensive lease on a few more acres of arable land, we wouldn't have to disappoint any of these kids."

"If only we could all come back next year," Vivian sighs. "My job at Urban Roots was better than my mom's job, even! I mean, I was happier going to and coming from work than my mom ever is. I don't want to have to get a job in fast food or anything like that. I want to work on *the farm*."

"I learned so much," interjects Christopher, "that my cousin, who really is a farmer – well, he has a really big garden – he's started asking *me* questions. I turned in my application today; I'm really hoping to come back for the second year."

Urban Roots Wish List

- 15-passenger van
 - Cargo van (for transporting produce and farmers' market equipment)
 - Toolshed
 - Certified produce scale that will weigh up to 100 pounds
 - Wooden garden carts (3)
 - Compost (75 yards)
 - Digital video camera
 - 25 outdoor folding chairs
 - Biggest and most fervent wish: a lease on 3-plus acres of arable land in Central Austin with an affordable, reliable water source on which to farm next year
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Eat Local Week - Dec. 6-13

Eat Local Week, sponsored by *Edible Austin* magazine, is an invitation to Central Texans to explore and celebrate the abundance of local food and to raise money for Urban Roots. The week will include many fun events, such as:

Kick-off event at the Downtown Austin Farmers' Market: A proclamation by the city of Austin, a 20-carrot salute, and other special activities. (Dec. 6)

Urban Farm Bicycle Tour: Farm tours, local food sampling, and fabulous prizes, including a fully outfitted bicycle. Co-produced with Bicycle Sport Shop, with additional sponsorship from Whole Foods Market. To register, e-mail: leslie_1@bicyclesportshop.com. (Dec. 6)

Austin Tea Party: Many of Austin's fine tea purveyors will demonstrate all that is mysterious and wonderful about tea, including chefs' tea-paired food tastings. (Dec. 6)

Alamo Film and Feast: The ultimate foodie movie, *Big Night*, with a re-enactment of the movie's finale feast prepared by head chefs John Bullington and Trish Eichelberger. (Dec. 7)

Drink Local Night: A celebration of locally made spirits, ales, and beers, featuring the ultimate local cocktail contest. (Dec. 9)

Art Gallery Night: Wally Workman Gallery hosts a curated one-night show featuring well-known

Texas artists offering works with a culinary theme. Also featured will be a Small Bites of Austin Showcase of local food producers providing a feasting of local-food treats and drinks. Call the gallery at 472-7428 for more info. (Dec. 11)

Finale event: Media Celebrity Local-Food Cook-off: Come to the Downtown Austin Farmers' Market to witness John Kelso challenge a celebrity rival in a local-food cook-off. (Dec. 13)

(Consult www.edibleaustin.com for updates.)

Volunteer Applications

Urban Roots is taking applications this fall for the spring 2009 growing season. Applicants must be 14 to 17 years old and attend school in the Austin area. Adult volunteers are also needed. For more info, call Kelly Stolpman at 342-0424 or see www.youthlaunch.org/programs/urbanroots.

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