

COMMUNITY MATTERS



PHOTOS TAKEN BY TAMARA GALLEGOS. COURTESY OF URBAN ROOTS

Raymundo, a farm intern, and Adrienne, a volunteer, wash freshly harvested cabbages.

PLANTING URBAN ROOTS

By Sharon Palmer, RD

Steve, a 17-year-old Hurricane Katrina evacuee from New Orleans, gets excited about his work at Urban Roots, a YouthLaunch youth development program in Austin, Tex., that uses sustainable agriculture to foster positive change in the community. Last year, he counted himself among the first batch of interns in the brand-new agricultural youth program. This year, he's been promoted to assistant crew leader.

Before Urban Roots came along, Steve had a tough time finding his groove in Austin. But tending to an urban organic farm, serving the fruits of his labor at a local soup kitchen, and selling the harvest at the farmers' market helped him get it back. Steve now feels like he is part of a community, giving back and feeling connected. In fact, he imagines one day bringing an agricultural business back to his hometown of New Orleans.

Stories like Steve's are made possible through agricultural youth development programs such as Urban Roots that are forming across the country. These programs empower young people and nourish local communities. Urban Roots is modeled largely after Boston's Food Project, where Mike Evans worked for five years before teaming up with Max Elliott at YouthLaunch to start the fledgling youth farming program in Austin. "Our mission is that through local service, we can effect change in the local community and make a difference in young people's lives. We empower kids—that is the largest piece," says Evans.

Urban Roots is promoted at local schools and churches in hopes of getting a bumper crop of interns aged 14 to 17 for the farm season. "We get a good diversity of young people in all aspects: race, gender, interests, and experience. Some are leaders, and some are at-risk. Some are strong, and some do well together. We create a rich diversity of interns," says Evans. "We bring young people together. For many, this is the first niche they've found."

Urban Roots recently interviewed 45 applicants for 15 spots for this year's internship and invited three interns from last year to serve as assistant crew leaders. Over a 25-week spring and summer growing season, the paid interns will work on Saturdays during the school year and six weeks during the summer to bring the project to fruition.

Onions, beets, carrots, cilantro, spinach, and more grow on Urban Roots' 1-acre organic farm. Evans explains that the organization's farming strategy takes into account culturally appropriate plants, those that are native to the region and thrive in Austin's hot climate. Since the weather permits year-round growing, the planting begins in early January and harvesting starts in March. And the Urban Roots strategy is working. Last year—their first year planting—brought in 18,000 pounds of fresh produce from January to July.

Once the produce is harvested, Urban Roots makes wise use of its bounty. "Part of our mission is to donate 40% of our harvest to hunger-relief organizations. So we go to the local soup kitchens and prepare and serve food for clients," says Evans. The remaining 60% of the harvest goes to the downtown farmers' markets and a lower income Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Nutrition Program farmers' market for a reduced rate.

Urban Roots has a strong alignment with access to healthy food in the community—an important goal, considering 33% of the babies born in Texas are projected to develop type 2 diabetes, the rate of childhood obesity is 50% higher than the national rate, and 81% of Texas high school students reportedly don't eat the daily recommended servings of fruits and vegetables. "One of our pillars is food access. We want to make a difference in the small way that we can, in helping people who don't typically have access to fresh, healthy, affordable produce access that kind of food," says Evans. By targeting soup kitchens, farmers' markets, and lower income farmers' markets, a larger portion of the community has access to healthful organic produce.



While the community also benefits from the program, the focus at Urban Roots is on the children. "We are following the food from the seed to the plate," says Evans. "They see the food through to the soup kitchen. They learn customer service, entrepreneurial skills at the farmers' markets, and language skills at the WIC farmers' market. They are learning about farming, where food comes from, about soil and compost. They are learning leadership skills like public speaking. They attend cooking classes and money management workshops. They are thinking about goal setting. And with our community lunch projects, chefs take interns to their kitchen and, with the youth, prepare meals for community members."

Positive press has helped expand Urban Roots' success. Local restaurants and lunch programs happily buy produce from the farm, and the organization was selected to receive the 2009 Local Hero Award from Edible Communities. And Urban Roots speaks and provides slide shows at events upon request. This positive publicity is important because the program relies on funding from local foundations, businesses,

restaurants, and individuals to keep its interns farming. While the emphasis is on youths, plenty of adult volunteers are needed to keep the program running smoothly. Evans reports that 1,000 hours of volunteer work were logged last year.

The impressions that Urban Roots leaves on kids' lives are simple and honest. "Some of the interns come from a background where money is hard. They have to become vested, to become proud of their work," says Evans. "At the first spinach harvest, one of the girls called out, 'Look at all of this. We just did this!' One of our guys went from being shy to walking around with the biggest head of lettuce at the farmers' market trying to get customers to come in."

A group of urban kids getting excited over spinach and lettuce? Now that's something to give you goose bumps. To learn more about Urban Roots, visit www.youthlaunch.org/programs/urbanroots.php.

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GETTING YOUR HANDS DIRTY

Agricultural youth programs are popping up everywhere, and they are a perfect setting for dietitians to dig in and volunteer.

For instance, community garden programs are all the rage. "Whether it's elementary, middle school, or nonprofit community gardens, they're all over the country," says Mike Evans of Urban Roots in Austin, Tex. And these garden projects all have one thing in common: "Programs like these always need help, whether it's time or money," he says.

Do a little Googling to find the garden projects in your community. You can donate money or gardening supplies, or better yet, roll up your sleeves, pull up a hoe, and get gardening. Garden for better access to healthful foods in your community, garden to feel more connected to food and soil, or garden to pay it forward.

And don't forget that many community gardening programs are lacking the one thing that dietitians have the unique power to provide: nutrition education. Evans says, "These programs would be interested in creating age-appropriate nutrition workshops. We need to strengthen nutrition education to make it fun and cool. We need new ways to access nutrition and make it interesting while people are young. Schools can't handle this. Ask yourself, 'What can I do?' and help out."

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