Urban Teenagers Grow 25,000 Pounds of Organic Produce to Relieve Hunger



by Abe Louise Young | August 2010

AUSTIN, TX—There's an oasis a mile off of Highway 183 in east Austin, Texas, where industrial sites and waste dumps bump up against apartment complexes and humble homesteads. A hand painted sign points up a dirt road: **Urban Roots Farm.**

This land in a hidden curve of the Colorado River is a cultivated organic farm where youth work the soil from 8 am to 3 pm, learn the principles of sustainable agriculture, grow fruit, vegetables, and flowers, and share their produce with people in poverty.

The interns earn a stipend of $40 a day for working seven hours a day, but money isn't their first motivation. "I didn't know anything about farming when I got here," says Mathew, a high school football player. "I like that it's a paid job, but I don't think people really care about the money. Hunger is a big problem in Austin, and we get to help with that. That's really what we're here for." The farm team is made up mostly of students who live on Austin's historically segregated east side. They apply for the job, and commit to farming for a season, from planting to harvest.

Nikki, 15, says, "Basically, we are teenagers, working on a 3 1/2 acre urban farm, and we love it."

"An immersion course in nature"







These fields are worked by the Alpha Dogs, the Beastly Beets, and the Crazy Chickweeds, nicknames that the three crews chose to inject fun into the workday. Gabby, 16, is the youth leader of the Alpha Dogs. She wears a bright red zinnia behind her ear, and directs folks to be careful not to damage plant roots when they pull weeds out. Her eight crew members spread out along a row of multicolored flowers, making sure not to step in the planting bed of fluffy black soil.

The farm interns start in February, weeding, composting, mulching the beds with straw, and planting seeds. They come after school and on Saturdays to get the season started. Then, in summer, the hard work of harvesting begins.

"We grow garlic chives, rainbow chard, tomatoes, cherry tomatoes, squash, cucumbers, melon, okra, eggplant, basil, edamame beans, sorrel, zinnias, and other flowers," Nikki lists. "You have to take care of every plant differently. You have to know when their season is, and rotate them so you don't tire out the soil. A lot of weeds will come up if you don't keep up with it."

Matthew says, "We just pull the weeds, we don't use any chemicals. We use fish emulsion for fertilizer, and attractor crops—those are crops that attract the bees so they pollinate, and attract the bugs to keep them from going after the other crops, like tomatoes."

Gabby chimes in: "With our bugs, we don't use chemicals to kill them. We clap them in our hands. You wouldn't think it would work, but it does!" Huge grasshoppers and crickets bounce between rows, buzzing loudly in the sun, but since they're not after the crops, the interns don't pay them any mind.

Later, the youth traipse en masse to the composting area, past tractors, sheds, a Port-o-Potty, and dormant fields. Jeff Paine, the leader of a composting nonprofit called Break It Down starts to lead a workshop on the intricacies of decomposition. The interns flash their knowledge: "Composting is taking anything that's come from the earth, and returning the nutrients that the plant borrowed back to the soil," Leffler says. Markel chimes in: "Compost: it's black gold!"

"You're correlated to every part of it"

Zack says, "From the seed to the sapling to the Farmer's Market, we see the veggie in every stage. In all aspects of the work, you feel directly related, and you're correlated to every part of it."

For Gabby, working on the farm has mostly ended her soda pop drinking habit. Her parents buy organic milk now, and she says her family eats more vegetables than before. "I bring my mom eggplant from the farm and she makes me eggplant sandwiches. I'm more aware of the things I eat now."

"This is an immersion course in nature," Kayla, 16, says. Gabby and Kayla are Assistant Crew Leaders, on their second year on the farm. They're each in charge of managing eight interns.

What is an Assistant Crew Leader (ACL)? Kayla explains: "I direct the work, and I have to keep myself positive, and keep my energy up, or else everybody comes down."

Kayla is nurturing more than the fields and younger interns. She's pregnant, and preparing her mind and body for motherhood. "I work hard on my leadership," she says. "I keep my crew on their toes, and to do that I have to keep myself on my toes."

Mathew heaps up a huge pile of weeds that the crew has yanked from the flowerbeds. "Being an ACL means they know how to boss us around."

Gabby protests. "I've learned that a leader is not a boss. A leader works with the team. A leader is part of the team," she says, and throws a weed at Mathew, laughing.



"I came here because wanted to help my community out"

Wednesdays are the most exciting day at Urban Roots. As part of a project they call Hunger Relief Wednesdays, the youth share the results of their labor. They deliver harvested produce to the Austin Food Bank and a poverty relief organization called Caritas. Food Bank boxes—often made up of dented cans, processed goods, and the cheapest calories—get a whole new look.

The youth load up the Urban Roots truck and unload bushels of bright, colorful organic vegetables at the agencies, bringing a truly different approach to ending hunger.

A smaller group of four interns, calling themselves C.A.F.E., or Community Action for Food Equality, gives presentations at fairs, and does outreach to engage the community in discussing where food comes from, how to improve the local food system.

Gabby says, "I wanted to do Urban Roots because I wanted to find a way to help my community out. Now, I can offer them organic food. I can increase food access, and the food we grow is fresher and healthier than food you can buy in a store."

Mathew echoes her feelings. "I've always lived here, so I wanted to give something back to my community, too. I've been twice to the Food Bank and three times to the Farmer's Market. I like that we get to meet new people and talk about something that we worked really hard for. From the Food Bank they bring the produce to Meals on Wheels, and the people are really sweet and really thankful. They don't have transport to go get food, so they are really glad that it gets brought to them."

East Austin's median family income is under the poverty level, and grocery stores are sparse. "It's the access to food that's the issue," Darriyan, 14, says. "People on this side of town don't have much access to good food, and they don't have the money to buy healthy, organic food."

Even if a person does have money, Darriyan's assessment is accurate: the quality of available groceries is fairly poor, as many people without transportation shop at corner stores and convenience stores. Another hopeful intervention Urban Roots brings into this landscape is offering a farm stand for clients of the Women, Infant's, and Children's Program (W.I.C.) health clinic. The farm interns sell vegetables to mothers there, mothers can pay with their food stamp cards, and an innovative expansion of access to organic food takes place where it's needed most.

"We need to take care of every single vegetable that grew"

Selling produce at the W.I.C. Clinic farm stand has special meaning for Kayla, who is expecting her first child.



"I'm gonna have a baby so I'm going to use the money from my farm stipend to get the baby stuff. Diaper Genie, the crib, the whole shelf set-up for the storage of the diapers and the changing," she says.

Kayla has taken Urban Roots as her launchpad. After her first year, she worked the garden at Eastside Café, a nearby organic restaurant that grows its own herbs and vegetables, and raises a flock of chickens. Kayla then took on hostessing duties inside the upscale restaurant. She's applied for the Johnson and Wales College of Culinary Arts in Miami, Florida and plans to take classes at the same time that she parents her new baby. She's hopeful about her future, and about dedicating her career to the joys of healthy food.

Is it going to be hard to juggle moving, a new baby, and culinary college at the same time?

Kayla just smiles. "I've learned how to work pretty hard," she says.

Turning back to the job, she cheers her crew on, reminding them that they're working for the good of the whole. "When you're harvesting, you have to get every vegetable. You can't ignore one, because you know somebody needs that vegetable. We need to take care of every single vegetable that grew!"