

Community Youth Education Program through Stone's Throw Urban Farm

Final Report for YENC12-055

Project Type: Youth Educator

Funds awarded in 2012: \$1,986.74

Projected End Date: 12/31/2012

Region: North Central

State: Minnesota

Project Manager:

[Anna French](#)

Project Information

Summary:

PROJECT DESCRIPTION AND RESULTS

The project took shape in the form of “Stone’s Throw Youth Grow”, an informal, day camp-style educational program in partnership with West Minnehaha Recreation Center, located in the Frogtown neighborhood of St. Paul. Throughout the months of July and August, youth involved in the community center’s drop-in program, had weekly, and sometimes bi-weekly opportunities to learn about the local food system, urban sustainable farming, nutrition, and plant science, among other topics. The classes were held both at the recreation center, where the youth installed a small garden plot, and at the Stone’s Throw Urban Farm plot located just a few blocks from the recreation center.

The youth involved in the program became very well acquainted with sustainable farming techniques used at Stone's Throw farm plots in their very own neighborhood, and received the chance to experiment with and employ various techniques themselves at their own garden plot. Youth involved in the program gained basic knowledge of plant and soil science, and how these affect various steps and practices in the agriculture process. Topics covered in these lessons were the plant life-cycle, the pollination process, photosynthesis and the carbon cycle, plant anatomy, and soil composition. Participants in the program also gained hands-on knowledge of sustainable agricultural practices, and explored the benefits and challenges of cultivating produce in an urban area. Youth were able to practice soil amendment techniques, out planting, designing efficient irrigation systems, companion planting and crop rotation, and plot design.

Whether it was through a tag game demonstrating the pollination process, harvesting potatoes and other vegetables for the first time, designing irrigation systems using straws and plastic cups, or participating in a cooking demonstration

using local vegetables, both smiles and “aha” moments were plentiful throughout the course of the education program. According to the pre-and post-surveys administered to the participating youth, their feelings toward farming have shifted both towards more interested, more knowledgeable, and more excited.

The project also included a few educational sessions with youth outside of the West Minnehaha Recreation Center. The BEST BUY PRE SCHOOL hosted a sustainable farming focus day in which four different classes of 15-25 preschool students explored the ideas of farming in urban areas, took a closer look at plant anatomy, and played games trying to identify which seed corresponded with which fruit or vegetable. Teenagers from Skyline Towers were also involved in the project, visiting three of Stone's Throw's farm plots, becoming familiar with the mission and techniques employed in urban farming. These teenagers practiced proper thinning techniques, discussed the implications and reasoning behind practicing sustainable, urban farming, and harvested and sampled fresh fruits and vegetables while learning about nutrition.

BACKGROUND

I worked in Omaha, Nebraska throughout the summer of 2009 with a community garden organization, the Big Garden Project. The project focused on installing community gardens throughout the urban area of Omaha, and extending nutrition and sustainable, local food production. The project included a series of educational sessions for different groups of youth affiliated with community centers, schools, churches, day cares, and youth groups. Each educational program and series of classes we taught was tailored to the garden specifics and age group we were working with. I also worked throughout the summer of 2010 in Vermont as a camp counselor at Farm and Wilderness Summer Camps. We worked with youth to run a fully functioning organic vegetable farm, fruit tree orchard, and small and large animal husbandry. We worked with youth ages 8-14 to cultivate vegetables and fruit sustainably and to grow food to serve at the camp cafeteria.

GOALS

Students will come away from the classes with a greatly improved understanding of how the food system operates and how an individual's food production and consumption choices impact their surrounding environment. Students will obtain a set of directly applicable skills for sustainable food production. The specific practices that will be taught in the hands-on classes include composting, cover cropping, crop rotation, growing according to organic standards (no use of pesticides, herbicides, fungicides or synthetic fertilizers and why), different watering systems (students will analyze efficiency of systems), diversified crop production, and direct, local marketing of farm produce. Discussions in lessons will prompt students to consider various means of cultivating produce, and contemplate how land use in urban spaces affects communities, and what meaning “community” holds for them. Students will learn basic guidelines about nutritious food preparation through educational demonstrations using fresh produce and will involve comparisons of foods that are farm-grown vs. grocery store bought. Students will also gain an understanding of how small businesses can operate sustainably. Students will be familiarized with the costs and benefits of starting a Community Supported

Agriculture (CSA) program by helping to pick and pack produce for distribution of CSA shares, and will have opportunities to aid in preparation for and sales during local farmers markets.

PROCESS

In the process of designing the project, we used a collaborative approach to create and implement the program itself. We worked with the farmers and partners at Stone's Throw Urban Farm to create a curriculum that clearly and creatively taught the sustainable techniques used by the farm and demonstrated the farm's role within the local food system. We sought out local groups with operating youth programs in the Frogtown neighborhood of St. Paul, and discussed the potential for collaboration with various organizations before deciding to focus the program primarily with the summer youth group at West Minnehaha Recreation Center, located very close to one of Stone's Throw's farm plots. We decided that the structure of the youth program there was well suited to weekly sessions and lessons that could be easily hosted either at the center or at the farm plot. This was also an ideal collaboration because all of the participants in the summer program at West Minnehaha Recreation Center were residents of the local neighborhood, where a good portion of Stone's Throw's operations are located.

The lessons and sessions themselves involved a variety of techniques including hands-on, practical learning, brainstorming, playing games, discussions and thought exercises, art, demonstrations, and field trips. We applied this multi-technique teaching method because it was a summer program, and we wanted it to be a fun way for kids to learn in a different manner than conventional classroom methods. In employing varied teaching methods, we hoped to enrich the students' understanding and expose them to new ways of learning and exploring. Beyond that, much of the nature of the material we covered is much better understood if done in practice, such as farming techniques and healthy food preparation.

The general structure of the classes followed a basic pattern. We would start with an introduction, and describe the material and activities we would be doing that day. Next we would follow with an energizer game, such as a name game, musical chairs, or hot potato. We would then go over the technical parts of the lesson, using diagrams and flip charts as visual guides, and keeping the students active in learning by prompting them with questions, repeating exercises, taking notes, drawing, brainstorming, and group discussions. After the active lecture portion would be the active demonstration portion. These portions of the classes varied greatly depending on the subject matter but included relay races to demonstrate the process of pollination, preparing and planting a garden plot, food preparation demonstrations, and group competitions to design the most effective irrigation system, among others. After this portion, which was usually the students' favorite, we would do a wrap up and debrief exercise to reinforce the importance of the material covered, and ensure that the students grasped the concepts, the students took notes in their journals. We designed the courses this way so that the same material would be presented in multiple ways throughout the lesson, to suit the needs of different styles of learners, and to teach practical skills as well as convey their importance.

PEOPLE

Abbie Shain: Student at Macalester College. Summer 2012 intern at Stone's Throw Urban Farm. Co-director of Community Youth Education Program Through Stone's Throw Urban Farm "Stone's Throw Youth Grow". Co-Wrote the curriculum and ran the program, teaching classes, and doing presentations.

Alex Liebman: Co-founder and partner at Stone's Throw Urban Farm. Acted as the farm consultant for the youth program. Offered insight on curriculum development and helped facilitate the soil science portion of the program.

Eric Larsen: Co-founder and partner at Stone's Throw Urban Farm. Helped facilitate the portion of the program hosted at the Best Buy pre-school.

Emily Hanson: Co-founder and partner at Stone's Throw Urban Farm. Served as a resource for curriculum development and helped with field trip days hosted at Stone's Throw Urban Farm.

West Minnehaha Recreation Center Staff, Sue: Coordinated with their summer programming to host a group of students and organized spaces for classes to be held. Communicated with students' parents about the program and about any field trips we took. Conveniently located one city block from a Stone's Throw farm plot.

Paul Runge (summer 2012 intern at Skyline Towers): Organized a visit with their teens summer program for a day-long intensive introduction into sustainable urban farming at Stone's Throw farm plot. Youth who live at Skyline and participated in their summer program.

Best Buy Day Care Richfield: Hosted a day-long program about sustainable and urban farming for the preschool students enrolled there.

Phil and Youth Farm Stewards Program: Organized partnership between Stone's Throw Urban Farm and Youth Farm Stewards program. Executed monthly visits, work days, and exchange between Stone's Throw Farmers and participants in the Stewards program.

RESULTS

The aspects of sustainable agriculture we focused on most were ecological soundness, and social responsibility. We did discuss the entrepreneurial aspects of sustainable agriculture endeavors briefly, but the program focused mostly on the two aforementioned components. Our intended audience was youth who lived in the

Frogtown neighborhood, where Stone's Throw Urban Farm was operating. We did not have a specific age range intended but ended up working with students ranging from preschool to high school aged. Our primary group of students at the West Minnehaha Recreation Center were aged from 6-14.

Throughout the summer we had 51 students attend classes at the recreation center, with weekly attendance ranging from 10 to 27 students. We administered pre-and post-surveys to gauge the effect the program had on students' feelings, knowledge, interest, and confidence in abilities surrounding sustainable agriculture. Overall, the survey results showed that the participating youth were both more interested, more confident, and more excited about cultivating food. The survey process was a bit flawed, however, in that the group of students was not consistent throughout the program, and the group of students who filled out the pre-survey was not the same group of students who responded to the post-survey at the end of the program, although there was some overlap. These students had a good grasp on the role of sustainable/urban agriculture within the local food system, and understood the environmental reasoning behind many of the techniques employed in sustainable farming.

The BEST BUY PRE SCHOOL hosted a sustainable farming focus day in which four different classes of 15-25 preschool students explored the ideas of farming in urban areas, took a closer look at plant anatomy, and played games trying to identify which seed corresponded with which fruit or vegetable. These students could identify 10 different types of vegetable and fruit seeds, name 5 different parts of a plant and their function, as well as describe the difference between farming in urban and rural areas.

Thirteen teenagers from Skyline Towers were also involved in the project, visiting three of Stone's Throw's farm plots, becoming familiar with the mission and techniques employed in urban farming.

DISCUSSION

I learned a lot during this project. I learned about sustainable urban farming techniques through working with farmers in their fields. I learned about teaching, organizing, and educating youth through working with educators at the recreation center, pre-school, and Youth Farm. I learned a lot also from the students involved in the program. Their creativity, intuition, and curiosity was very inspiring. It was great to see the youth involved in the program transform into capable farmers and gardeners who took pride in their work at the garden plot, and who were confident that they could continue to practice sustainable agriculture in the future. The program was very fluid and took much more the shape of a fun summer camp rather than a strict series of lessons. I expected a more consistent group of participants, but it turned out we were able to reach a much broader audience than originally expected. I would try to have a more consistent core group of students in the future. I would also try to improve the record keeping process, whether it be by administering surveys along with every session, or expanding the realm of the journals we had students keep throughout the summer. In this way, we could gauge which sessions the students gained the most from, and change the ones that

students did not like or did not understand. Beyond improving monitoring and evaluation, I think more outreach, both through the press and through community would be very valuable, to include as many people as possible in the project.

OUTREACH

Through working with Stone's Throw, many partnerships and opportunities to share arose throughout the educational program. It was extended beyond the involvement with the West Minnehaha Recreation center, and included a teenage group from Skyline Towers, a group of Iraqi exchange students, pre-school students in Richfield, and the Youth Farm Stewards program. Sharing information and hands-on farming experiences with all these groups spread the message of the farm and the project beyond the scope that was initially expected.

A presentation about the entire project took place at Macalester College in the fall of 2012, and the report of the overall project was shared with students, educators, and community members. The presentation was planned in partnership with the Institute for Global Citizenship at Macalester College. Faculty from the biology, educational studies, environmental studies, international studies, anthropology, and religious studies departments were all in attendance, as well as many college administrators. Students from a service learning course, and philosophy of education course also attended the presentation, and these students followed up by planning a visit to the farm for a service work day and to learn more about urban sustainable farming.

At the conclusion of the summer program, August 2012, we hosted a celebration at the West Minnehaha Recreation Center. We invited neighbors and friends, staff of the recreation center, farmers and partners from Stone's Throw, parents of students, and community members. Students involved in the program presented what they had learned that summer and we celebrated with music and eating a meal with some of the produce provided by the students' garden and some provided by Stone's Throw. Students presented artwork, journals, poems, and information they learned throughout the summer.

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