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Growing food and access, education and opportunity through collaboration and dedication to hope

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Abstract

KC Farm School at Gibbs Road generates an inspiring environment transforming Wyandotte County through community-wide, multi-generational, and participatory food projects while providing vocational training, job opportunities, healing and fun. KC Farm School celebrates our county's rich cultural heritage, and we offer hope in these urgent times. Our neighbors struggle with food insecurity, economic hardship, limited land access, climate change, soil degradation, disease, and disconnectedness. Many use SNAP benefits, live below the federal poverty level and face food insecurity. Wyandotte County, considered a 'sacrifice zone', is home to the country's third largest rail yard and suffers environmental degradation due to that industry, to silver and limestone mining, and because of aging infrastructure. Still, KC Farm School grows hope by offering education, access, and opportunity to create solutions by working 'with' our neighbors not simply 'for' them. We learn what our neighbors want by hosting quarterly roundtables. 'Let's Grow Wyandotte!' grew from concerns about food insecurity; and today 300+ households engage in the program which provides plants, seeds, supplies, and mentorship empowering participants to grow their own food. Through relationships with school districts, we bring students on-farm hands-on for farm activities and a robust curriculum, and we offer farm apprenticeships for youth aged 13-18. We collaborate with farmers through the KC Food Hub, Great Plains Regeneration, the KC Young Farmers Chapter of the National Young Farmers Coalition, and Growing Growers Kansas City to address soil health through regenerative practices. We've created an economic model that provides opportunities for young farmers and emerging entrepreneurs while increasing food access for our community by hosting a weekly, on-farm farmers market; accepting SNAP, matching with Double-Up Food Bucks, encouraging pay-what-you're-able, and barter agreements to ensure our neighbors have equitable access to nutritious food and education to lead healthy, whole lives. This win/win/win economic model provides our food and education programming at a rate that is determined by the individual participating; some pay less, and some pay more. In three years, KC Farm School has engaged 30,000+ individuals through participatory food projects, on-farm education and vocational opportunities. On fourteen urban acres, we're creating innovative solutions with our community as we prove that when we all share what we have, we all have what we need. In this space of hope amid despair, good grows.

Keywords

urban farming, nonprofit, community, workforce development, equity

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Abstract

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INTRODUCTION

Kansas City is rich in both urban and rural farming operations and nonprofit organizations working to feed and educate the community about local food and agriculture. KC Farm School at Gibbs Road, co-founded in 2018, has a mission to empower individuals of all ages, ancestries, and abilities through on-farm, hands-on experiences and vocational education connecting them to the land and soil, food, community, and opportunity. The organization has created a robust experience in the heart of Kansas City to achieve that mission. This mission and our broader vision: "At the center of its community, the farm generates an inspiring environment transforming the individual and society through community-wide, multi-generational, participatory, and collaborative food

projects while it provides job training opportunities, healing and fun” speak to the urgent challenges our community and environment in Wyandotte County face and shape our organizational goals.

The health needs of our neighbors are immense, and there are many socioeconomic barriers within our community. There are high percentages of families using SNAP benefits, low numbers of SNAP retailers, and many living below the federal poverty level. These factors strongly correlate with impaired health outcomes (KC Health Matters, 2020) which drives our mission to increase accessibility, affordability and opportunity to our farm programs and food. Some even call our community a ‘sacrifice zone’ due to extensive ecological damage and lack of investment in the county (Bullard, 2011). These numbers paint a bleak picture, but through working with our neighbors, we know that there is hope and opportunity. Wyandotte County is one of only two counties in the nation with no ethnic majority, an indicator of the cultural representation most communities in the future will experience (Montgomery, 2017). This ethnic richness provides many opportunities to work together, co-create common ground and actionable solutions while sharing our cultures through food and community. We have strong, proven outcomes towards achieving the above-mentioned mission and vision *with*, rather than simply *for* our community; we do so through three pathways: Food and Access, Education, and Opportunity.

DISCUSSION

Food Production and Access

KC Farm School at Gibbs Road manages two urban farms. Gibbs Road Farm is a 3-acre urban farm with 1.5 acres in production space, 0.5 acres in native prairie restoration and the remaining acre houses a 6,000 square foot community greenhouse, chicken yard and building space. Common Ground Farm is adjacent to Gibbs Road Farm and is an 11-acre parcel of rolling pastureland purchased by the organization in 2020. Common Ground farm is under permaculture planning with soil building and native restoration set to begin in 2023. The team at KC Farm School at Gibbs Road uses regenerative agriculture practices to maintain and improve soil health, increase nutritional density in crops, conserve water and capture carbon.

Using these practices, in our first full year, 2019, we grew over 5,000 pounds of food which we shared with our neighbors in Wyandotte County through a regional membership in the Kansas City Food Hub, collaboration with local gleaners, our weekly on-farm, pay-what-you’re-able farm market, and our Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program which also accepts SNAP benefits. In 2020, we increased food production to 8,000+ pounds to meet our neighbors’ food needs during the COVID-19 crisis and distributed \$19,000 worth of free food to the community with support from the CARES Act. In 2021, we grew 10,267 pounds of food and donated \$22,167 worth of food through barter, gleaning and direct to our community. Because access to fresh, healthy food is a human right, KC Farm School consistently works to tear down barriers to access, affordability and opportunity by focusing on location and innovative access and affordability models including offering all food and programming using a Pay-What-You’re-Able model, acceptance of state-sponsored food benefits (SNAP, Sr. Farmers Market Nutrition Vouchers), locally sponsored food

benefits (Double Up Food Bucks), community collaborations (gleaning, direct donations) and individual partnerships (barter).

Education

KC Farm School's established Prekindergarten-adult on-farm educational offerings promote conservation and environmental sustainability by promoting planet care, people care and economic opportunity. All of the programs listed below have been created through shared power and informed by our community through community roundtables and extensive feedback and have proven exemplary outcomes in both workforce placement and knowledge learned.

Agritourism for all ages: We offer farm visits ranging from farm tours or volunteer days to in-depth visits tied to state and national educational standards for youth. We have a robust curriculum that has been created by our team of farmer-educators that is scalable for individuals and groups of all ages, ancestries and abilities.

Ag Explorers (PK-2nd grade): Our youngest neighbors plus their adult, join us on-farm for monthly sessions exploring basic tool use and motor skills development, communication and teamwork skills, animal care and a Science, Technology, Engineering, Art /Architecture, or Math lesson within a monthly focus.

Jr. Growers (3rd-6th grade): Youth join us on-farm for a weekly summer session where they are equipped with the skills to learn about regenerative agriculture as a career option from multiple angles (entrepreneurship, marketing, value-added goods production and farming) while engaging in daily STEAM activities and discussions about social and environmental justice. Jr. Growers create a communal daily lunch direct from the field to learn about nutrition, wellness and a hyper-local food system and engage with community members of all ages, ancestries and backgrounds to promote intergenerational and participatory engagement.

Farmers on the Rise: Youth Apprenticeship (7th-12th grade): Young adults engage in Farm Apprenticeships through schools or as individuals. School/Organization-based groups visit 1-2 times per week throughout the school year or as an Individual who joins as a paid junior farm crew member. Apprentices dig deeper into regenerative agriculture as a career option and work towards mastery of skills using KC Farm School's "Ag Matrix of Skills" which includes agriculture-specific skills, 'soft skills', marketing and business skills development as well as learning the 'why' behind the practice--to improve the health, social and environmental conditions in which we all live. We currently work with three school districts that bring 26 individuals weekly as farm apprentices. This programming includes intensive farming experience and prepares youth for a first job, or a career in agriculture.

Community workshops: Monthly workshops are led by both farm staff and our volunteer community educators. Workshops are held at our on-farm farmers market, through on-farm events, and in tandem with our Let's Grow Wyandotte! food sovereignty program for Wyandotte County families.

Opportunity

Embedded within the mission of KC Farm School at Gibbs Road and through the act of growing food and teaching others how to grow food, opportunity grows too. Opportunities for food sovereignty, economic and career growth, community cohesion and a more accessible and equitable society grow through multiple channels.

We host quarterly community roundtable discussions for Wyandotte County residents. They are invited to guide our work through this discourse and have provided input on the development of Common Ground farm, our educational programming and provided input to city planners about transportation and accessibility in the community. The ideas they hold are rich and relevant and as our capacity grows, more of their ideas will be brought to fruition.

Let's Grow Wyandotte! is an innovative food sovereignty program developed by KC Farm School's co-founders in 2020 in which farm staff provides mentorship, seeds and plants to support members in growing their own food and in learning to care for their land and water. Neighborhoods are mobilized. Communities engage in discourse, as we provide support and connection across the richly diverse Wyandotte County landscape. We currently have 210 households participating in this program. This year, veteran members have formed a sub-group to support and recruit new members from their neighborhoods. They call themselves, 'Seed Starters!' and exemplify the leadership opportunities inborn in KC Farm School's organizational structure.

Our mission is fueled by volunteers and in-kind donors. In 2021 we tracked 2,221 volunteer hours, which included individual and community groups and individual participation in our committees. Our volunteer-led committees are an integral part of our organization. The collective expertise of committee members has led to several program improvements and additions. Our "Eco-Team" is a volunteer group of scientists, educators and engineers who plan ways to lower the carbon footprint of our farm and share with other farmers and community members on how to maintain the health of our farm, our society, and Earth. They produced a 60+ page "Farm Sustainability Action Plan" which can be found on our website and serves as a strategic plan for our organization and an action handbook for our community to implement environmental regeneration and care in individual homes. In 2021, we hosted numerous community events including our first ever Fall Fest. Over 400 community members attended this free event which included free farm food, face painting, games, music, public health resources, agritourism, community art, and development projects. A vendor area at the event promoted BIPOC, woman-owned, immigrant and refugee-owned, and Wyandotte County small businesses. This event generated less than 5 pounds of landfill bound waste and united a community.

CONCLUSION

KC Farm School at Gibbs Road has made strong progress towards mission and vision through working with and not simply for its community. We eagerly work together to keep creating a brighter, more just, and equitable future where everyone has what they need to live healthy and whole lives. In three years, we've grown community around our 14-acre farm by connecting to the neighborhood, to the county, across the metro, and to the past.

We work with instead of for our neighbors inviting them to participate in creating their own dream. Several of our farmer market vendors have 'graduated' to bigger markets across the city and are working to grow into other markets. We provide that first market for emerging vendors and an opportunity to practice pulling all pieces of production together in order to meet new customers. We support young businesses, many of which are women and BIPOC-owned.

Our Farmers on the Rise Youth Apprenticeship is bringing people of different abilities onto the farm for learning and employment. As we seek to be a more equitable organization within a system that is broken, we spend considerable time breaking down barriers to participation in our programming, employment, and success beyond our acres. We are providing training for our staff in 2023 to meet our friends better in terms of trauma-informed care, and equity.

We're taking on the hierarchical system to create a flat leadership structure and we acknowledge that decision-making is taken on by all members of our organization in relation to the time spent working toward expertise in a particular field. We continually seek mentors as we mentor people that come to us. We have budgeted for consensus-building training and leadership training for all members of our staff and board in 2023.

In 2023, we are taking on a series of multi-year projects connected to our eleven acres, Common Ground. We are in the beginning stages of a Master Plan, constructing a high tunnel and wash/pack station, and building soil through multiple regenerative farming techniques. We're collaborating with several native plant specialists to eradicate invasive species and incorporate native plants and trees. We envision animal husbandry, a bike path, off-grid solar and agrivoltaics systems and are seeking funding from various sources to support that work. We plan to move our farmers market operation to Common Ground in 2023, and will install a semi-permeable parking lot.

We hold this land precious and our stewardship of it sacred. We work together to grow tomorrow better than today by implementing elements of a circular economy system within and around the organization and are staying committed to the pay-what-you're-able model moving forward into 2023. As we work to grow the good, we seek to involve our community in all the ways possible. Gibbs Road Farm, the home of KC Farm School at Gibbs Road and to so many of those who grow across the city, sits with an open gate. We welcome all and invite conversations that matter.

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