

North Lawndale Career Training Program

Speakers: Melissa Matterson, Patsy Benveniste, Eliza Fournier, Teresa King, Kenya Miller, Valentino Davenport & Ellen Betkey

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>> MELISSA MATTERSON: The Chicago Botanic Garden has always been active with community gardening. When the Chicago Horticulture Society began in 1890 horticulture was just a much stronger part of the normal life of the everyday citizen.

The Green Youth Farm is an attempt to reconnect people with that legacy, with those origins.

>> PATSY BENVENISTE: Our first Green Youth Farm was established in 2003. That program was successful even in the first two years of operation. It convinced us that we should attempt to establish a version of the program in the city of Chicago.

>> ELIZA FOURNIER: North Lawndale is a community that's gone through a lot of transition in Chicago's history. We had done a lot of work in the community so we were familiar with a lot of the issues of community disinvestment, struggling schools, kids not having a lot of things to positively engage them in after school and during the summer.

It was an area that we were seeing a lot of need for this type of activity and in addition to that we had been working for several years with neighborhood housing services, their Neighbor Work State where they were basically fulfilling a lot of that need by bringing up the housing stock and helping out with community gardens so we were volunteering and providing plants and materials for those days so we already kind of had this relationship.

They said what if we did something a little bit bigger, something more permanent. We were kind of looking at the same thing at the same time.

>> PATSY BENVENISTE: With the help of our friend Charles Leeks at Neighborhood Housing Services we found a site right next to his operation which was an abandoned vacant lot that had fallen off the tax rolls and we started working with the city of Chicago and said we would like to set up a Green Youth Farm there.

We were lucky enough to get IMLS funding. We would not have been able to do the North Lawndale site without it. That funded all the start-up costs at that site. Those are the big initial costs that occur; building the beds, fencing, getting that first group of kids in and paid for and getting the program staffed.

>> TERESA KING: People used to think the garden was like a club or something because we were so excited. We were like oh you're going to the garden. A lot of people were like what is the garden? We didn't say Green Youth Farm. We'd say you going to the garden. It was like they thought it was a code name for something special but it worked.

>> MELISSA MATTERSON: I do feel that IMLS took a leap of faith with us because the proposal wasn't that specific in areas because I couldn't be specific. I really give them credit for giving us a chance.

>> TERESA KING: We made composite as well. We had to learn how to make composite.

>> FEMALE SPEAKER: And crops.

>> TERESA KING: Right and so it was like I was learning how to do it. We did it hands-on. It wasn't nothing like oh we're here guys. All you got to do is water it today and go home. No, we worked.

>> ELIZA FOURNIER: These students are getting reviewed in front of their peers weekly. It's hard to give that type of intense evaluation to someone in that kind of setting and it's also hard to receive it. What we saw with a lot of the students it was really hard for them to receive the positive feedback. One girl started crying. She didn't think she deserved it. No one had ever talked to her like that.

>> TERESA KING: We hated weeding, you know because it was work so we wasn't used to work. Now it's like you get your work done, you'll be finished, you move on to the next assignment. Maybe you move on to something that you enjoy doing. We love

watering because it wasn't nothing. We just sit there holding the water hose. So like me, I work in retail now. We have stocking and things like that. Certain areas I like doing but I know in order to give to that area I have to finish what I don't like.

>> VALENTINO DAVENPORT: I know for me the Green Youth Farm we like changing because you all know. I was first came there I was so shy. I wouldn't talk to nobody or nothing. Like over the years I got like more like just more into people, whatever and such and would talk to people, hang out with them as such. It like really did improve me. Now like the third year I just like now I'm just like really talking to people even though I was cool. It wasn't like bossy go do this, go do that and such. I was just like hanging out with them just talking to them like a regular person.

>> KENYA MILLER: And when it was time to buckle down and we were given rules and we had to follow we was kind of upset about that. I was because I hate when people try to tell me what to do so I was kind of upset about that but then again I knew I learned in the long run that everywhere you go you have to follow by the rules. You can't just do what you want to do. That's part of life. I was glad that they taught me at that time when I was 15 years old that you have to follow by the rules. You can't just do what you want to do.

>> ELIZA FOURNIER: We're getting these kids engaged in a positive activity. They're getting a job. They're getting paid so they're contributing to the economy and we're also growing a lot of food.

>> PATSY BENVENISTE: In 2010 we denoted nearly 7,000 pounds of produce to food pantries.

>> VALENTINO DAVENPORT: It's great because once they expand your mind about what you're eating and such and what's going on in your body and then like open your mind to different things I'm like what's going on in my relationship and with other stuff, whatever.

It's just like putting a Spanish mind once you have that little thing open up.

>> KENYA MILLER: It's amazing that how the garden has changed us and changed our diets, our lives, our personalities. It changed a lot about us. We never thought that it would that just

a little summer job that we was doing could change our whole perspective of everything of life.

>> ELIZA FOURNIER: It's beautiful.

>> PATSY BENVENISTE: The operations of the garden's food service incorporate the Green Youth Farm produce into our cafe.

>> ELLEN BETKEY: The Green Youth Farm is one of our vendors that we buy from here for a cafe at the Garden and for our special events. Our Chef, Mike Kingsley works directly with the Green Youth Farm folks to find out what's in season.

>> PATSY BENVENISTE: Over the past ten years especially the role of public gardens and botanic gardens has evolved dramatically and the kind of activity that is sponsored through the Green Youth Farm is increasingly prominent.

Our Board members recognize that public gardens especially those like the Chicago Botanic Garden that have a really big education and research infrastructure will be going beyond the traditional boundaries and that we are developing and modeling programs that can be useful to other botanic gardens and other kinds of organizations.