

Chicago Botanic Garden, Glencoe, IL
“North Lawndale Career Training Program”
Running Time: 7:06

[birds chirping]

THE CHICAGO BOTANIC GARDEN HAS ALWAYS BEEN ACTIVE WITH COMMUNITY GARDENING. WHEN THE CHICAGO HORTICULTURAL 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.

OUR FIRST GREEN YOUTH FARM WAS ESTABLISHED IN 2003. THAT PROGRAM WAS SUCCESSFUL, EVEN IN THE FIRST TWO YEARS OF OPERATION. AND IT CONVINCED US THAT WE SHOULD ATTEMPT TO ESTABLISH A VERSION OF THE PROGRAM IN THE CITY OF CHICAGO.

NORTH LAWNSDALE 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 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 ON THEIR NEIGHBORWORKS DAY, WHERE THEY WERE, YOU KNOW, BUSILY FULFILLING A LOT OF THAT NEED BY BRINGING UP THE HOUSING STOCK, HELPING OUT WITH COMMUNITY GARDENS. SO WE WERE VOLUNTEERING AND PROVIDING PLANTS AND MATERIALS FOR THOSE DAYS. SO IT WAS--WE ALREADY KIND OF HAD THIS RELATIONSHIP, AND THEY SAID, "WHAT IF WE DID SOMETHING A LITTLE BIT BIGGER, YOU KNOW, SOMETHING MORE PERMANENT?" AND WE WERE KIND OF LOOKING AT THE SAME THING AT THE SAME TIME.

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. AND WE WERE LUCKY ENOUGH TO GET IMLS FUNDING. WE WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN ABLE TO DO THE NORTH LAWNSDALE SITE WITHOUT IT. THAT FUNDED ALL THE START-UP COSTS AT THAT SITE. AND 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.

PEOPLE USED TO THINK THE GARDEN WAS, LIKE, A CLUB OR SOMETHING, BECAUSE WE WERE SO EXCITED. WE WAS LIKE, "ARE YOU GOING TO THE GARDEN?" AND A LOT OF PEOPLE ARE LIKE, "WHAT IS THE GARDEN?" YOU KNOW, WE DIDN'T SAY "GREEN YOUTH FARM" OR "CHICAGO BOTANIC GARDEN." WE SAID, "YOU GOING TO THE GARDEN?" AND IT WAS, LIKE, THEY THOUGHT IT WAS A CODE NAME FOR SOMETHING SPECIAL, BUT IT'S WORK.

I DO FEEL THAT IMLS TOOK A LEAP OF FAITH WITH US, BECAUSE THE PROPOSAL WASN'T THAT SPECIFIC IN MANY AREAS BECAUSE I COULDN'T BE SPECIFIC. AND I REALLY GIVE THEM CREDIT FOR GIVING US A CHANCE.

WE MADE COMPOST AS WELL. YOU KNOW, WE HAD TO LEARN HOW TO MAKE COMPOST. YOU KNOW--

GREW THE CROPS.

RIGHT, AND--SO IT WAS, LIKE, ABOUT US LEARNING HOW TO DO IT. WE DID IT HANDS-ON. IT WASN'T NOTHING LIKE, "OH, WELL, HERE, GUYS, ALL YOU GOT TO DO IS WATER IT TODAY AND GO HOME." NO. WE WORKED.

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. AND WHAT WE FOUND 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.

WE HATED WEEDING, YOU KNOW, 'CAUSE IT WAS, LIKE--IT WAS WORK. SO WE WASN'T USED TO WORK. AND NOW IT WAS 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. YOU KNOW, WE LIKE-- WE LOVED WATERING BECAUSE IT WASN'T NOTHING. WE WERE JUST SITTING THERE HOLDING THE WATER HOSE. YOU KNOW, SO, LIKE, ME, YOU KNOW, I WORK IN RETAIL NOW. YOU KNOW, WE GOT TO STOCK IN AND THINGS LIKE THAT. CERTAIN AREAS I LIKE DOING, BUT I KNOW, IN ORDER TO GET TO THAT AREA, I HAVE TO FINISH WHAT I DON'T LIKE.

I KNOW FOR ME, THE GREEN YOUTH FARM WAS, LIKE, REALLY LIFE-CHANGING BECAUSE, LIKE, Y'ALL KNOW, 'CAUSE, LIKE, WHEN I WAS--FIRST CAME THERE, I WAS JUST SO SHY. I WOULDN'T TALK TO NOBODY OR NOTHING. AND, LIKE, OVER THE YEARS, I GOT, LIKE, MORE-- LIKE, JUST MORE INTO PEOPLE, WHATEVER AND SUCH, AND WOULD TALK TO THE PEOPLE, HANG OUT WITH THEM AND SUCH. AND, LIKE, IT REALLY DID IMPROVE ME. NOW IN, LIKE, THE THIRD YEAR, I JUST, LIKE-- NOW I JUST LIKE REALLY TALKING TO PEOPLE, EVEN THOUGH I WAS CREW LEADER AND SUCH. I 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.

AND WHEN IT WAS TIME TO BUCKLE DOWN AND WE WERE GETTING RULES WE HAD TO FOLLOW BY, WE WAS KIND OF UPSET ABOUT THAT. I AIN'T--I WAS, 'CAUSE 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 YOU ALL--EVERYWHERE YOU GO, YOU HAD TO FOLLOW BY THE RULES. YOU CAN'T JUST DO WHAT YOU WANT TO DO. IT'S--THAT'S A PART OF LIFE, AND I WAS GLAD THAT THEY TAUGHT ME AT THAT TIME WHEN I WAS 15 YEARS OLD THAT, YOU GOT TO FOLLOW BY THE RULES. YOU CAN'T JUST DO WHAT YOU WANT TO DO.

WE'RE GETTING THESE KIDS ENGAGED IN A POSITIVE ACTIVITY. THEY'RE GETTING A JOB. THEY'RE GETTING PAID. SO THEY'RE, YOU KNOW, CONTRIBUTING TO THE ECONOMY. AND WE'RE ALSO GROWING A LOT OF FOOD.

IN 2010, WE DONATED NEARLY 7,000 POUNDS OF PRODUCE TO FOOD PANTRIES.

IT'S GREAT 'CAUSE, LIKE, ONCE THEY EXPAND YOUR MIND ABOUT WHAT YOU'RE EATING AND SUCH AND, LIKE, WHAT'S GOING ON IN YOUR BODY, THEY-- AND THEN, LIKE, JUST OPEN YOUR MINDS TO DIFFERENT THINGS, LIKE, OH, LIKE, WHAT'S GOING ON IN MY RELATIONSHIP AND, LIKE, WITH OTHER STUFF, WHATEVER? YOU KNOW, IT JUST, LIKE, REALLY EXPANDS YOUR MIND ONCE THAT LITTLE THING OPEN UP.

IT'S AMAZING THAT HOW THE GARDEN HAS CHANGED US AND CHANGED OUR DIETS, OUR LIVES, OUR PERSONALITIES, OUR--IT'S CHANGED A LOT ABOUT US.

WE NEVER THOUGHT.

LIKE--WE NEVER THOUGHT THAT IT WOULD, THAT JUST A LITTLE SUMMER JOB THAT WE WAS DOING COULD CHANGE OUR WHOLE PERSPECTIVE OF EVERYTHING OVER LIFE. AHH!

THAT'S BEAUTIFUL.

THE OPERATIONS OF THE GARDEN'S FOOD SERVICE INCORPORATES THE GREEN YOUTH FARM PRODUCE INTO OUR CAFE.

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. AND OUR CHEF, MIKE KINGSLEY, WORKS DIRECTLY WITH THE GREEN YOUTH FARM FOLKS, FIND OUT WHAT'S IN SEASON.

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.