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**From the Ground Up:
Healthy Food Access in Central Texas**

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Healthy Food Access in Central Texas**

by

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Report

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Abstract

From the Ground Up: Healthy Food Access in Central Texas

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2010

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Being able to afford nutritionally complete food that provides energy and health, and continuing to have access to that food day after day after day, is a luxury that's missing from the lives of the 460,000 Central Texans who are classified as food insecure by the USDA. This project is an attempt to understand what the issues surrounding healthy food access in Austin are, and what the potential solutions might be. The three nonprofits that are profiled in this report - Urban Roots, Karpophoreō and Sprouting Healthy Kids - use education, community building, and advocacy to try to get closer to that goal of not only feeding Central Texans nutritious food, but changing the entire community's relationship with that food. The multimedia component of this project can be found online at www.kellywestphoto.com/masters-report.

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From the Ground Up: An Overview

When I called Mike Evans to ask him about documenting the youth development program that he was co-coordinating, I already had a vision in my mind for how the story would look. Urban Roots is a program that employs 30 high school students on a 3.5-acre farm in East Austin, where the kids grow and harvest organic produce. I thought I would make a documentary film about an at-risk kid who had spent his whole life indoors, subsisting on Cheetos and Coca-Cola, and then came out to the farm and discovered the value of healthy eating. In my imaginary movie, this reformed couch potato would bring home a box of fresh veggies to his working-class mother, teach her how delicious a fresh carrot tasted right out of the ground, and through this experience his diet, his family's diet, and in fact their whole lives would be improved. But as it turns out, that's not what the story of healthy food access really looks like at all.

"There is no clear answer," said Max Elliott, program coordinator for Urban Roots, when asked about how to improve access to healthy food. "It's a social answer in a lot of different ways: how we've designed our cities, how we institutionalize poverty, and segregate and concentrate poverty, how we've lost relationships with food through the industrialization of agriculture, and the extreme processing of food. There's not an easy answer."

Increasing access to healthy food is a very complicated problem. Changing people's diets is not even the first step toward solving that problem. Even in Austin, Texas, a place exploding with brainpower and forward thinking, there are neither ideas nor motivation sufficient to solve the problem of how people can get the food they need to live healthy, productive lives. Being able to afford nutritionally wholesome food that

provides energy and health, and continuing to have access to that food day after day is a luxury that's missing from the lives of the 460,000 Central Texans who are classified as food insecure by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

This project is an attempt to understand what the issues surrounding healthy food access in Austin are, and what potential solutions might be. The short answer: There is no short answer.

"The health of the community - and that's social, economic, and even, I hate to use the word, moral fabric of a community - absolutely starts with food," David Davenport, the former CEO and President of the Capital Area Food Bank (CAFB), said in a recent interview.

Successful efforts at addressing healthy food access tend to be more subtle, more deliberate, more incremental, and far more complicated than giving away boxes of fresh spinach, based on the research done for this report.

"It's more than charity," said Erin Flynn, who runs an organic farm in East Austin, and works with a number of nonprofits to address issues like obesity and health education, as well as healthy food access. "I think what people often fail to realize is that people can change their community. We're so used to being told: invest in high tech stocks in Asia so you get a great return on your money and that way you'll be making an investment. Is that really an investment? If you care about your community you need to invest in your community."

The three nonprofits that are profiled here - Urban Roots, Karpophoreō and Sprouting Healthy Kids - use education, community building, and advocacy to try to get closer to the goal of not only feeding Central Texans healthy nutritious food, but changing the entire community's relationship with their food.

Urban Roots is educating high school students about food choices and food access, while growing produce to donate to local charities. Karpophoreō works to improve the diets and lifestyles of a community of formerly homeless people living in an RV park in southeast Austin by planting vegetable gardens in unused spaces around the city. Sprouting Healthy Kids is trying to open the door for local farmers to get their produce into public schools, and change the way school children think about what they are eating, in order to improve the local food economy and the health of Austin students.

In recent years, the issue of what we eat has come to the forefront nationwide. Why? One reason is the U.S. obesity epidemic that is causing a variety of health problems: type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and cancer to name a few. All of which are costing taxpayers billions of dollars each year in medical care. More than one-third of adults in the U.S, and 17 percent of U.S. children are obese, according to the Center for Disease Control. Texas epitomizes the problem. In a report released this year by Trust for America's Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the state ranked 13th in the nation for adult obesity and took 7th place for childhood obesity.

The increasing number of contamination outbreaks across the country has put food consumption in the public spotlight as well: green onions, tomatoes, spinach, and eggs have all had major recalls in the last five years for contaminants ranging from Salmonella to E. Coli. Just last month the Texas Department of State Health Services shut down a processing plant in San Antonio and ordered a recall of tainted celery.

There also seems to be a general Zeitgeist encouraging self-sufficiency and local enterprise. Perhaps it's a reaction to dependence on foreign oil? Or a desire to return to our farming roots? An aversion to the perceived environmental toll of shipping our food halfway around the world? The reasons are debatable, but the numbers are real.

The sale of local produce nationwide increased from \$4 billion to \$5 billion between 2002 and 2007, according to the market research publisher Packaged Facts. The number of people growing their own food in the U.S. rose 10 percent from 2007 to 2008, to 36 million households, according to the National Gardening Association. In 2000, the U.S. Department of Agriculture reported the number of farmer's markets in the country at 2,863, and now the list tops 6,200 markets. The terms "local" and "organic" are not just concepts anymore, they are full blown movements.

But these healthy eating trends are not accessible for everyone. The US government defines a person making \$10,830 dollars a year, or a family of four that makes \$22,050, as living below the poverty line. The U.S. Census bureau reports that 147,766 people in Travis County find themselves in this category.

Researchers and policymakers tend to agree, however, that a family must earn at least twice the federal poverty level to meet their basic needs. The Economic Policy Institute, a nonprofit Washington, D.C. think tank, calculates that a family with two adults and two children would need to bring in \$47,238 to cover basic living necessities (housing, food, transportation, child care, and health care) in the Austin area. Using that calculation, approximately one in three Travis County residents (311,005 persons) qualify as low income. These residents are unlikely to be able to afford the premium prices that healthy foods demand, and in fact sometimes cannot afford even the most basic of food needs. CAFB provides emergency food assistance to 48,000 people every week from 21 counties in Central Texas, 41 percent of them children.

"Food insecurity, hunger, or obesity in the life of a child is economically, socially, morally unacceptable," said Davenport. "I have yet to run across a person that argues with that. Okay, what are we going to do about that? Are we going to be bold enough to take that first step? Be bold enough to sustain that over the long haul? If we can do that,

we could be a food secure community, with a healthy, vibrant, local and sustainable system.”

There is a surprising link between not having enough food and obesity. A number of reports published by the Food Research and Action Center, a national nonprofit in Washington, D.C. that addresses hunger and food insecurity, have found higher rates of obesity among people that are food insecure, particularly women.

Poor eating choices, large portion sizes, the easy availability of junk food and the lack of access to healthy food are the main causes of obesity, says Dr. Deepa Vasudevan, a researcher with the University of Houston Medical School, who specializes in obesity research. In fact, she says, a poor diet can lead to health issues in a wide range of areas.

“From heart disease to stroke to pulmonary infections to arthritis to cancer,” Dr. Vasudevan said during a telephone interview, adding: “People with low socioeconomic status have higher rates of obesity.”

As anyone who has walked through both the produce section and the Ramen noodle aisle of a grocery store can attest, it is often more expensive to buy healthy food. “It’s easier for us to get a can of beans rather than fresh beans,” Dr. Vasudevan said. “We need to make it accessible for people to eat healthy.”

But it isn’t as simple as making healthy food affordable, as local farmers will tell you.

“Really good food is expensive,” said Carol Ann Sayle, who runs Boggy Creek Farm in East Austin with her husband.

She said that half of her gross profits are spent on labor, and it’s a very labor-intensive process to grow what she calls “handmade vegetables.”

Besides that, Sayle said that many of the people she meets, including workers on her farm, are not interested in eating the produce the farm grows. It's not part of their normal diet.

"It wouldn't matter if we gave it away," she said.

Part of the reason for that is education, and the need to simply introduce people to healthy foods and healthy cooking. James McWilliams, an agricultural historian and a professor at Texas State University in San Marcos, thinks that too much emphasis is placed on the value of local food, when the bigger issue is the fact that people are not eating healthy in the first place.

"Good food isn't just local food," said McWilliams, who recently published a book questioning popular perceptions about what makes food sustainable. "You double the size of the hurdle when you add exclusively local into the equation."

Education, socioeconomic status, and culture have a lot to do with what people eat, McWilliams said.

"Eating is not just about putting food in front of somebody," he said.

Leslie Lockett Sweet, Director of Public Affairs for HEB grocery stores, said the company sometimes struggles with getting people to engage in the community activities they offer aimed at combating hunger.

"It always takes more energy and more money and more time than you plan for," she said in a recent telephone interview. For example, when some of the stores offered free cooking classes in which participants got to take home free food, they didn't have anyone sign up. Not until they had employees actually stop customers in the store and talk to them about the program, and then expand the service to include babysitting, did they finally generate some interest.

“We haven’t found success with a fast-and-easy approach,” says Sweet. “It’s usually a very complex, intentional, longer-than-expected strategy.”

That appears to be true of any approach to addressing healthy food access looked at for this report. Each of the three nonprofit organizations profiled is trying to get at the bigger issues that are intrinsically tied to healthy food access: community involvement, education, and the policies controlling our food system. The approaches vary, but all are complex and fairly nuanced in the sense that they are not just coming at the issue from one angle.

“When we talk about health, and we express our desire for a healthier community,” said Andrew Smiley, Farm Direct Projects Director for Sustainable Food Center, “it’s not just the physical, although that’s what we most closely associate with food. But it’s also the environmental, the economic and the cultural.”

Given the depth and complexity of the problem, nonprofits can’t be expected to do the job on their own. The one idea that practically everyone with a connection to food access issues seems to agree on is this: It’s going to take everyone making lots of changes to have any hope of reducing food insecurity in our community.

“We’re going to have to continue to take all entities - corporations, individuals, foundations, government, nonprofits, for-profits - all working together on this,” said Longenecker. “The first thing[s] we have to change are our own minds.”

Urban Roots: Leading by Example

Visiting the Urban Roots farm in East Austin last year, this reporter was impressed with comments exchanged during a staff meeting:

“I feel like you’re so good at what you do, that you have a hard time stooping to an intern level, and you just need to tone it down.”

“I think you’re doing a good job connecting with the interns.”

“Sometimes I feel like you don’t think before you act.”

The surprising thing is that these aren’t adults giving each other constructive criticism; they’re high school students, and they were participating in an important part of the Urban Roots curriculum called “Straight Talk.” It’s a technique for providing honest feedback on the work that the students have been doing, in a positive and non-judgmental way.

“Sometimes it’s scary for our farm interns because they’re worried about the constructive criticism,” said Mike Evans, the program coordinator at the time who was facilitating the straight talk session, “I think of it as a wonderful opportunity to help each other grow.”

Straight Talk is one of many components of the youth development programming in Urban Roots, which on its surface appears to be about organic agriculture, but is really more about leadership.

The students plant, tend, and harvest vegetables at the Urban Roots Farm near Bolm Road and Highway 183, learning about sustainable agriculture along the way. In 2008, the program’s pilot year, students farmed just one acre and harvested 18,000 pounds of organic produce. Forty percent of that was donated to local hunger relief

organizations like Caritas and Capital Area Food Bank. In the 2010 season, using 3.5 acres, they harvested 26,000 pounds of produce and are hoping for 30,000 next year. Students sell the rest at farmers markets, and they can take home as much as they want.

But food and agriculture are just the vehicles that Urban Roots uses to address the larger goals of its program, Evans said.

“We give youth healthy relationships with land, healthy relationships with food, and healthy relationships with themselves,” Max Elliott, current program coordinator for Urban Roots, said in a recent interview. “I would love to think that we’re kind of starting the next generation of food leaders.”

Urban Roots is funded by the umbrella organization YouthLaunch, whose goal is empowering young people through service. Some of that empowerment in Urban Roots comes from the opportunity for teenagers to learn from other teenagers.

“It’s essentially having a peer-led model where we realized that youth are going to listen to people more like their age or more like them, than they are to adults,” said Elliott.

Vivian Alston, Steve Young, and Breez Smith (the students who were talking to each other in the meeting) were Assistant Crew Leaders (ACLs) in 2009, which means they applied and were selected to return to the Urban Roots program to act in a more advanced leadership role, after working one season as farm interns.

The trio became friends when they worked as farm interns, and in their new roles they met each week with Evans to discuss the progress of the interns and practice their skills as youth leaders. In addition to the constructive feedback they would give each other, Evans had them role play in different scenarios that they might encounter on the farm: an intern is weeding too slowly on a row of plants; an intern is rude to an ACL

during a lesson; an intern is having a hard time interacting with customers at the farmer's market.

"You could say, remember how you harvested these yesterday? And then you'll prompt them to tell a story," Evans said, offering advice as the ACLs struggled through this last scenario.

This season, the program will employ 24 farm interns and six farm leaders from high schools across the city, purposefully selecting a mixture of leaders and at-risk youth, boys and girls. The students are paid stipends for the work they do - it averages out to a little less than \$6 an hour for the interns, and about \$6.50 for the level-two workers like ACLs. They commit to working one weekday after school and every Saturday in the spring, and five days a week in the summer.

The skills taught during the program extend well beyond farming. There are cooking classes with local chefs, public speaking opportunities including interviews with the media, volunteering at soup kitchens and food banks, money management workshops, and job training in that if they don't meet expectations on the job, they can be fired.

"People want to look to us like we're creating a future generation of farmers and that's not necessarily true. I think we're creating a civically minded group of young people...a more attuned consumer, and healthier relationships to food and the environment," said Elliott.

Alston, Young, and Smith came from very different backgrounds, but ended up being close friends anyway. According to Elliott, this is an intentional part of the Urban Roots program.

"Our land is really unique in that it is a space that they're not familiar with," he said. "It's not like anything that they know in their neighborhood, it's not like their school grounds, like the school garden would be, it's not like a park down the street. So

when they come out there, they're all coming with a really blank slate. Nobody has any agriculture experience, so they have to lean into each other to get things done."

Alston, a junior at the Liberal Arts and Science Academy magnet school at the time, is a tiny but outspoken 17-year-old and a self-described "nerd". She loved the new changes in her friend circle as a result of her involvement in the program.

"Urban Roots has introduced me to a lot of people I never would have met before," Alston said. "People from different backgrounds, different ethnicities, different places in their lives, different ages, and they have different things that they care about. I've come from a very strict social group into this kind of relaxed and amazing new family that is so different and so eclectic. But it all comes together and we all work great together."

Smith, Young, and Alston were learning a balance between being a peer and being a leader when they would interact with other farm interns their own age. For Smith, that experience led him to think about becoming a teacher.

Soft spoken and thoughtful, Smith, 18, was living on his own since his mother moved to Midland to care for her mother. He was working two jobs, Urban Roots and Austin's Pizza, and attending an alternative high school that accommodated his busy schedule. He has an easygoing personality and is likely to greet you with a hug before a handshake.

"I'm ready to learn this so I can keep it and know it and recall it anytime I need it," Smith said of what he was learning at Urban Roots, "I feel like this is something I can keep and teach my entire life."

Young, an evacuee from New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, is built like a linebacker but might be better described as a teddy bear. He is sweet and very open, and

has a flair for the dramatic that made him the class clown of the group. At 17, he is more introspective than most adults you have probably met.

“They really see the real me for who I am, and they accepted me,” said Young, speaking about the students and staff at Urban Roots. “Not because I’m from New Orleans or I got dreads or I talk funny. They like me for who I am inside. They get to know you, and not your image.”

Young talked about wanting to return to New Orleans to teach people there about nutrition and sustainable agriculture. He graduated from Reagan High School, but Elliott has lost touch with him since, and acknowledges that Urban Roots has few techniques for quantifying or tracking what the ultimate effect of the program is on the students. While the youth coming out of the program are articulate and knowledgeable about organic agriculture, there are not many examples that can be cited of students who continue on in related fields.

One student received a scholarship for horticulture at LSU. Smith worked with a foundation on a gardening project the year after he left Urban Roots, but now he is focused on writing and performing hip-hop music. There is no system in place yet for tracking the students’ progress, so some notable examples may be missing. With the program in only its third year, the students have not been out long enough in order to assess whether the goal of creating more informed and impassioned community leaders has been achieved or not.

If the students’ opinions count for anything, though, Urban Roots is a huge success.

“This program has taken me a long way from where I started,” Young said. “My future looks a whole lot brighter now than it did before the program.”

Urban Roots: More Than Charity

Urban Roots, an Austin-based nonprofit, is trying to battle the issues of food access, childhood obesity, and nutrition education by training an unlikely army: teenagers. Using organic agriculture as a vehicle, Urban Roots is empowering young people to think about social change, and arming them with the skills to make that change happen.

“Overall what makes our program unique from other food groups is that essentially we’re not a food group,” said Max Elliott, program coordinator for Urban Roots. “We’re a youth development program that uses food as a medium, and farming as a medium, for youth to give back to their community.”

Texas has the second highest rate of food insecurity in the country, according to the US Department of Agriculture, with 16.3 percent of the population experiencing at least intermittent episodes (if not monthly recurrences) of reduced food intake and disrupted eating patterns. Urban Roots farms 3.5 acres in East Austin and donates 40 percent of the produce it grows to hunger relief organizations, which last year came out to over 10,000 pounds of organic vegetables donated. The students who participate, all between the ages of 14 and 18, also volunteer at those organizations, serving lunch at Caritas, cooking for Meals on Wheels, and sorting canned goods at the Capital Area Food Bank.

“When you see young people growing food to give back to the community, it makes you pause,” Elliott said. He thinks when adults see teenagers leading in that way, it inspires the adults to contribute to the food access cause. Such contributions, Elliott and many other experts on food access believe, have to include more than charity.

Elliott likes to make a distinction between charity and social change, and designed a workshop at Urban Roots to help students understand the difference.

“I feel like we’re not thinking about food access the right way,” said Elliott. “Overall, as a community, we have a very conservative way of looking at this issue. When you look at the traditional food-pantry model, food in, food out, that’s not increasing food security in the long term. It feeds people for the very short term.”

David Davenport, former CEO and President of Capital Area Food Bank, is a strong advocate for the work the food bank is doing, but he agrees that more is required than simply providing food.

“Food banks have to move away from just feeding the hunger line to strategically finding ways to shorten it,” he said. But he thinks it will take more than the hunger relief organizations to make that happen.

“You’ve got to think the community has a role, as a whole,” said Davenport. “The private sector has a role, the public sector has a huge responsibility. The social sector has a huge responsibility as well.”

Adrienne Longenecker, Chief Development Officer at the Capital Area Food Bank, thinks that the first step is an internal one.

“The first thing[s] we have to change are our own minds,” she said.

The Capital Area Food Bank is maxed out in its current location of 60,000 square feet at distributing about 25 millions pounds of food, Longenecker said. The group has plans to move into a new facility in Austin that is twice as big. In order to reach the level that they need to be at for serving food insecure Central Texans, they should be distributing closer to 40 million pounds of food, she said.

The food bank is ahead of many of its counterparts in that the fastest growing product area for donations they have is fresh produce. The problem Urban Roots has encountered with their fresh vegetables donations, is that many food distributors have no way to store produce in large quantities. Most of the food that the food bank distributes comes from the US Department of Agriculture, in dried or canned form. The refrigerator you would need to handle the food if it was mostly fresh or frozen would be huge and prohibitively expensive.

“CAFB struggles greatly from a facility standpoint,” said Davenport. “Most people drive by it and think, gosh, that’s a huge building. But it’s way too small for what it’s doing.”

Longenecker says the new facility will also have increased cold storage, but still there is the issue of distributing fresh food before it goes bad.

Urban Roots has started to rethink where their donated vegetables go, in order to ensure that the organizations that take them have the capacity to use them.

“The last thing we want to do is grow all this food and it not be used, or not be appreciated, so we’re always asking our hunger relief partners what foods do you want, what are the quantities you can use,” said Elliott, “I think in a way we’re building capacity within the hunger relief community to think more creatively on how to use more fresh produce as they plan their meals.”

Although Urban Roots will continue to give back to the community in the form of food donations, the greater good that Elliott sees the program doing comes from educating youth who will go on to educate others.

“From the minute they get out of the van when they’re on the farm they can cultivate healthy relationships with the land and their food,” he said. “I’d like to think that we’re creating youth food advocates.”

Karpophoreō: Preaching a Garden Gospel

When you sit down to chat with Steven Hebbard, don't plan on making small talk. Hebbard's style of speaking is part preacher, part poet, and part hippie. His ideas about gardening are as big as his ideas about God, and to understand everything he is saying, you might need a Master's degree from seminary school and some experience in organic agriculture. Hebbard has both.

During a recent interview, the 33-year-old Hebbard sat on the donated sofa in the living room of his 400-square-foot mobile home, parked on a corner of the Royal Palms RV Park in southeast Austin and talked about his vision for the Karpophoreō Project, an organic gardening program for the homeless that he started in 2009.

"Whenever I'm looking at the community I'm trying to create here," he said, "I feel like I'm integrating the margins. Margins that were neglected, that are growing naturally. And what I'm seeing is the grass of their lives is breaking through, the beauty of this community is breaking through, and all I'm doing is just watching where that's happening. Places where no one else is looking."

Hebbard's concept for the project was to build vegetable gardens in backyards and empty lots that might normally go unused. The vegetables harvested from the gardens would be split between the project and the landowners – usually families who had volunteered their backyards. The sale of that half of the produce would be used to pay the homeless and formerly homeless workers, thus providing them a job, income, and occasionally a bounty of leftover organic vegetables. The project has ended up being more about building community than providing jobs, which is actually exactly what Hebbard had been looking for.

Growing up in the suburbs of Bakersfield, California, Hebbard was a latchkey kid who didn't always feel like he belonged.

"Ever since then, I've wanted to create a setting where I'm part of a community by necessity," he said.

He wanted to feel needed.

After earning a Master's of Arts in communication and culture from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, in 2003, Hebbard enrolled at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, with plans to get his Master's in Divinity and become a pastor. But after one semester, mounting student loans and a feeling that he wasn't exactly sure about the path he was on led him to quit school and reanalyze his goals.

After leaving school, he moved in with a family that lived on an urban farm, where he had his first real exposure to being part of a community that was based around gardening. In 2005 he moved to Austin, and after being laid off from his teaching job at a Christian middle school, Hebbard decided it was time to try something new.

"I saw it as an opportunity," he said.

In the summer of 2008 he knocked on the door of Boggy Creek Farm, an organic family farm in East Austin, and asked if he could have a job. He was turned away. But he kept returning, and finally after his third attempt the owners, Carol Ann Sayle and Larry Butler, let him start working the fields.

"He had kind eyes, and he seemed serious," said Sayle, "All my other interns have wanted to farm because they want to grow food for people. Steven wants to change their life."

Hebbard found that by working to grow food and having plenty of access to organic vegetables, he developed more of a connection to the food he was eating. Instead

of the HEB burritos and hot dogs that had been his staple, he was eating the food from the farm.

“It became something more to me than a dollar sign,” he said. “I could take a chance on a collard green, and try it a number of different ways, and throw it out nine times out of ten. But when I find the way that I like to cook it - which for me is in bacon grease mixed up with macaroni and cheese - then it becomes this beautiful thing.”

He developed a taste for Brussels sprouts, tomatoes, and onions that he had never had before. He started caring about the quality of other food products that he was eating, like meat, and looking for things that were less processed. After one season, Hebbard started thinking of a way that he could integrate his love of farming with his desire to help the poor.

In 2009, Hebbard approached Alan Graham, who runs the Austin-based nonprofit, Mobile Loaves and Fishes, with his gardening project concept, an idea that had already seeded in Graham’s mind. He had been working to help people on the streets for years. In addition to the food trucks that distribute food to the homeless, Mobile Loaves and Fishes runs a program called Community First! that provides recreational vehicles as homes.

Graham loved the idea of integrating the work he was already doing through Community First! with an organic gardening initiative that would benefit the formerly homeless in his program. In fact, he volunteered his backyard to be the first garden location.

“It’s the only way,” Graham said, when asked about how to improve the diets of the homeless. “The government’s not going to come do this and you’re not going to get it through the food banking system. You can’t build all that refrigeration into all these little bitty food pantries. The only way is to get people to figure out how to grow their food.”

Hebbard named the program the Karpophoreō Project, after a Greek word that means “to bear good fruit in every good deed.” Eventually it came to be known as simply KP.

“No one could pronounce it,” said Hebbard.

Graham offered Hebbard the model trailer that they use to show potential donors of Community First!, so that he could get the program started, but couldn’t pay him anything at first. Hebbard found himself not only trying to help a community of formerly homeless, but actually living next door to them in the Royal Palms RV Park. He continued working at Boggy Creek Farm as well as a second job at a senior citizen activity center, and with free housing and a small stipend of food stamps, he was able to get by.

“I’m normal in most ways, and I made this decision to do a very non-normal thing,” said Hebbard. “It has been a real challenge.”

Even though Hebbard has what he wanted in a community that needed him, it has been a struggle to stay upbeat, especially when the people around him are dealing with hardships like drug addictions, health problems, and losing their homes.

“I feel like I’m at the fingertips of the people living in this community, so when they dive down and fall back into something, I dive down and fall back into it with them, even if I’m not doing the same things. I’m just on this emotional rollercoaster,” Hebbard said.

A little over a year since starting the program, Hebbard has moved into a trailer across the street and is living with another KP volunteer. His original trailer went to the second employee hired to work for KP, Jen Ardill, who works as the Community Relations Coordinator.

Hebbard has continued to learn what works and what doesn't in terms of reaching the people in his community. For example, he has found that motivating residents in the community to farm the gardens is not as effective as planting gardens outside their trailers.

"Proximity of the gardens does make a difference, and the proximity of community definitely makes a difference," he said.

KP has moved away from the model of selling the vegetables they harvest in order to make a profit, instead using the vegetables to feed the community. "Is that the most valuable thing that homeless people could be doing, trying to compete with for-profit organizations?" Hebbard asked, rhetorically.

Now, he said, the food stays within this circle that has been created, of planting, growing, harvesting, and eating the food produced by the program. Today, there are 16 gardens, making up about half an acre of farmland all together, and about 15 formerly homeless residents living in trailers in Royal Palms that are part of this community that Hebbard has helped create.

Though overall he feels this experiment is working, he doesn't see himself living here forever.

"It's not a sustainable model for me," he said. "It's draining."

But for the time being, Hebbard will continue planting vegetables, leading bible studies, organizing group breakfasts, and preaching his gardening gospel.

"To one audience I'm an organic, passionate evangelist, and to this audience over here I'm a passionate evangelist for Jesus Christ, and those two are not mutually exclusive," he said. "Together, they lead to the same end: People worshipping God in a healthy sustainable world."

Karpophoreō: Growing Community the Organic Way

The crew that arrived on a bright, spring Saturday morning to help build a garden in southwest Austin was an improbable lineup of characters. There was the recovering alcoholic with a bum leg, the chain-smoking senior citizen, the heavyset volunteer talking non-stop on her cell phone, and the 26-year-old college grad who just wanted to help.

Yet such is the contingent of homeless, formerly homeless and city residents from which the Karpophoreō Project (KP for short), a local nonprofit organization, is trying to knit a community devoted to the life-giving properties of the organic garden.

“Our community is made up of people who have been hurt and disappointed with life, who are vulnerable and have been conditioned not to trust people, but who choose to give of themselves regardless,” said Jen Ardill, a recent addition to the KP staff. “Each resident has such a unique and strong personality.”

After a lengthy discussion between a pair of volunteers about how to operate the tiller, the KP faithful tore into their fourteenth yard with the plan of building a vegetable garden brimming with kale, squash, spinach, and onions. The infant nonprofit’s original goal was to provide jobs for the homeless by turning unused urban spaces, backyards and empty lots, into edible (and profitable) vegetable gardens. But the project has become more than just a platform for helping people trade in their St. Augustine grass for Swiss chard.

“How can we use food to knit people together into a real community?” Steven Hebbard, project founder, said is the question he’s trying to answer with KP. To that end, 33-year-old Hebbard abandoned his former goal of becoming a minister in order to live in a trailer park among 15 formerly homeless people and try to build a community. He

named the project Karpophoreō (pronounced “carp-o-four-ay-o”), after a Greek word that means “to bear good fruit in every good deed.”

Hebbard wants that community to include more than just the people in the trailer park, though. He also wants the volunteers and the garden hosts, those offering their yards for planting, to become part of it as well, and to want to connect to the people they are helping. The idea of having a crew of volunteers to build your vegetable garden for you might be appealing just to avoid the manual labor, but many garden hosts actually participate because they want to foster a relationship with people in need.

“I wanted it to be normal for my kids to have a garden and to know people who were homeless and were from a different background than us, or sometimes were from the same background as us and still ended up homeless,” says Amy Hardin, who has four young sons and was one of the first families to offer up her backyard in southwest Austin to the program.

The Karpophoreō Project is funded by Austin-based Mobile Loaves and Fishes (MLF), an outreach organization that provides food and clothing to the homeless. KP is centered around the formerly homeless living in Community First! trailers in the Royal Palms RV Park near the Austin airport, which are part of a housing program started by MLF.

MLF has 11 food trucks in Austin that each distribute about 100 meals a day. At \$2 a meal, that’s over \$800,000 spent on feeding the homeless each year. The budget for the Karpophoreō Project is less than \$50,000, including Hebbard’s salary and a housing stipend for Ardill (next year will be the first year KP actually has its own budget, so the numbers are an estimate). But the organization serves a much smaller percentage of the homeless population than MLF as a whole, focusing primarily on the 15 Community First! residents in the Royal Palms RV Park.

A count conducted by the Travis County Ending Community Homelessness Coalition in 2009 estimated the homeless population living on the street or in shelters to be roughly 2,585 people, though coalition officials say the actual number of homeless is difficult to track. The population is by its nature transient, and many do not want to be found.

The roughly 15 formerly homeless residents living in trailers provided by Community First! at the Royal Palms RV Park pay rent and utilities. Hebbard moved into the RV Park when he started the KP program, and began knocking on doors rounding people up. “It got everybody involved with each other, and friendly towards each other,” said Lloyd Bell, one of the program participants.

What Hebbard quickly discovered was that it was more effective to organize activities that brought people together, rather than to try and motivate them to work in the gardens on a regular basis. The experience of being homeless had left many of the people in the park hungry for some kind of fellowship.

“It gets scary when you’re on your own, and you have to fight to protect what you’ve got,” said Bonnie Parkee, another program participant who is also a double amputee - she lost her legs due to complications from diabetes.

Unfortunately Parkee and Bell were both kicked out of the trailer park for breaking management rules about allowing unregistered guests to stay in your trailer. Parkee moved into a trailer in a different RV park on the other side of the city, and Bell is staying with friends while he tries to save the money he needs to relocate his trailer. Even though they stay in touch with some of the KP participants, they have lost that sense of community.

“I really miss seeing everybody,” Bell said recently, while eating lunch at Angel House soup kitchen in downtown Austin.

The problem with creating a community within individuals who are not used to relying on other people, and are not always dependable, is that sometimes they let you down.

“We want them to have one cohesive growth curve, from being homeless to flourishing, and it just is not that way,” said Hebbard. “It just goes up and down and up and down, and they just live their life on this razor’s edge.”

Alan Graham, who heads Mobile Loaves and Fishes, said that’s to be expected, and that we should let go of the idea that someone who has lived a life on the streets is going to suddenly start working a day job and everything will be “fixed.”

“I’ve gotten where I hate that word – solution, solve - what have we ever solved?” says Graham. “Now what happens if we begin to look at things like poverty and homelessness like the disease that they are, what can you or I do as a society, to begin to relieve the suffering associated with that disease?”

KP is still trying to figure out exactly what the best techniques are for relieving those symptoms, and so far the organizers don’t have a concrete way to quantify the effects of their work. As is the trouble with many small nonprofits, there is no standardized way of evaluating whether something is effective or not, beyond anecdotal evidence.

“We have lots of stories,” said Hebbard.

Hebbard said what they will start doing this fall is counting the numbers of bags of produce distributed to each resident. In a slightly more esoteric calculation, he also thinks it makes sense to look at the number of people that each resident is connected to because of the program.

For example, there are two older women who live in the RV park that are not Community First! residents, but have both started actively participating in the community events with KP. One of the women is teaching a formerly homeless man how to read, and both cook food for the program participants. Drawing people into the community who are not homeless or formerly homeless is crucial to its success, in Hebbard's view.

"Community First! doesn't have all the resources a community needs to have," he said. "Having this park available to us and having these people around us - like these grandmothers who know how to take care of people - they have those resources."

KP will probably always have trouble getting its formerly homeless community to work "regular" hours in the gardens, because of the nature of a population that is not acclimated, and in some cases not capable, of maintaining that kind of schedule.

"Once you get on the streets its so hard to get off. Most people don't have IDs, and they're not used to eating regularly, or being able to take a bath. You get in that rut of all you're doing every day is working to get your alcohol and cigarettes," said Bell.

Hebbard and Graham's long-term goal is to persuade the city or a donor to provide a large tract of land where they can expand the Community First! concept into a gated community for the formerly homeless. Their dream for what they would call the Jennifer Gale Village is that it would be producing some of its own food in the form of farming and even raising livestock. Most important, it would be a place where many homeless people could find stability – through housing, and by having a community of people with shared experiences to support them.

"Its kind of like church," Bell says of KP. "It's a fellowship, you get together with people and see that you can make a difference, and you can change your life for the better."

Sprouting Healthy Kids: Building Capacity for Local Food

When Erin Flynn and her husband, Skip Connett, moved to Austin five years ago to start an organic farm that had been a long-time dream of Connett's, they hoped to get involved with a farm to school program right away.

"We were interested in farm-to-school before we started the farm," said Flynn, sitting in the early twentieth-century farmhouse on the property in East Austin where they farm four acres of organic vegetables. "We wanted our children to have that experience of having their school invested in a farm."

What they soon discovered is that a relationship between Austin schools and local farmers didn't exist. "We assumed the structure would be in place and we would just slide into that," Flynn said, "but what we've learned is that the structure is not there yet."

In 2006, The Sustainable Food Center (SFC) started trying to change that. The Austin nonprofit began a farm to school program called Sprouting Healthy Kids, which is trying to encourage the purchase and consumption of local produce by schools in the Austin area. The program, which has been slowly growing over the last four years, aims to get increasingly more food grown by local farmers into Austin school cafeterias, and to educate the students at those schools about healthy food choices. Local farmers are not seeing much benefit from it yet, though.

John Lash, who works as a conduit between farmers and the schools, distributing all the local produce that AISD currently purchases, says only a relatively small volume of local produce is being purchased right now.

"From one farmer, I buy 200 pounds of spinach per week," Lash said, "and 10 pounds is delivered to AISD schools. So there is very little impact to the farmer."

The program, which started with six schools, is now partnering with 12 elementary and middle schools in the Austin Independent School District, and one charter school (KIPP College Prep). The schools all have student populations that draw from predominantly low-income and ethnic minority communities, where the risk of obesity and diet-related illness tends to be disproportionately high.

“We started small-scale intentionally,” said Andrew Smiley, the Farm Direct Projects Director for SFC who is coordinating the program, “and we’ve also grown really intentionally without trying to expand too fast and put too big of a burden on the local food supply, and on the district.”

If you ask local farmers though, selling to the school district would not be a burden at all, but a welcome new client.

“What every farmer needs is a reliable customer,” said Flynn. “People forget farmers work for months and months getting a plant ready to harvest, but if there isn’t someone available to purchase that food at a fair price when its ripe, then you’re desperate. But if you know there’s a school that’s waiting for this produce, it takes a tremendous pressure off the farmer.”

David Jones, whose farm in Hondo, Texas, grew the green beans that were served as a side dish recently at AISD’s Ann Richards School, says he has the produce to fill orders for a school district the size of AISD right now.

“We’re already supplying the state of Texas with green beans,” Jones said, “Whenever the school districts want to start I’m ready to go with them.”

Jones’ farm, unlike Flynn’s, is a large wholesale operation about 120 miles southwest of Austin, growing 5,000 acres of green beans, and thousands more acres of sweet corn, squash, cabbage, and broccoli. Lash says he has many clients like Jones that could supply a school district with fresh produce, if the demand existed.

“To make it work, AISD has to order more,” he said.

The biggest hurdle of instituting a farm-to-school program in Austin is with the schools themselves. With over 85,000 students in Austin Independent School District being served 3.5 million lunches a year, all of which must meet USDA nutrition guidelines and go through a rigorous bureaucratic process in order to approve changes to menus or ingredients, the procedure for instituting a large shift like farm-to-school is excruciatingly slow.

AISD Chef Steven Burke oversees all of the district’s cafeterias, and has been working with Smiley and SFC to incorporate local produce into school menus. He knows from experience how slowly change happens. When Burke wanted to add chipotle to the ingredients used in the school kitchens, for example, he had to go through a bidding process, test all the samples, make a final selection, and only then could the spice be used the following year.

“It took me a whole year just to get in one ingredient,” he said. “It’s not anything that’s done overnight.”

Even though the process is slow, AISD is committed to improving the nutritional quality of its food. Burke was one of those improvements – he was hired five years ago to revamp the school menus, and has continued to work with food staff to incorporate healthier cooking techniques and menu options into the cafeterias. Chris Carrillo-Spano, director of Nutrition & Food Services in AISD, hired Burke because she was looking for someone to bring creativity to that process. She says the district has been working for the last 20 years to gradually implement changes to school lunches to make them healthier.

“We have systematically reduced the amount of fat and sugar in our menus over time,” she said, “and have increased the amount of fiber and fresh fruits.”

Carrillo-Spano said she sees huge potential benefits in serving local produce to school children: reducing transportation costs, contributing to the local economy, and of course, better food.

“The benefits of having the freshest food possible to serve the students is the best benefit of all,” she said.

But before that can happen, major institutional changes will have to take place. For example, changing the menus to accommodate what is available locally.

“If you want to serve seasonal produce, you need to have seasonal menus,” Lash said.

For Texas, that means the summer squash served at the start of the school year might need to be replaced with carrots in the winter. Or the Brussels sprouts that take all winter to grow will only be available in the spring.

Also, the school kitchens are going to have to develop a certain amount of flexibility if they want to truly partner with local farms. After all, the produce that is or isn’t available can vary depending on things as unpredictable as weather changes.

“This isn’t just accommodating a school, this is creating a relationship between the farm and the school,” Flynn said. “And that doesn’t mean the school comes to us and says ‘give us boxes of uniform product on this day that weighs this amount.’ That’s not how a farm works, that’s how a factory works.”

That’s another thing to understand – while some farmers, like Jones, are interested in selling to schools primarily for the large customer base, smaller farms like Flynn’s are motivated by having a connection to the community.

“A farm has its own goals, and not all of us want to be huge,” said Flynn. “Unless we’re individually paired with certain schools, we can’t do the volume, nor do we want

to. I want to be tied to that school. I want to know the teachers and I want to know the students.”

In this way, Flynn said, she would be able to work with a kitchen individually to better accommodate the students’ and the chef’s needs. So while smaller farms can not supply a school district like AISD with all the tomatoes they need year round, they can be tapped for smaller supplies of things as needed, and they can provide educational opportunities for the students in the form of farm field trips and visits from the farmer. AISD would have to factor in these varying abilities and needs in order to be a benefit to farms of all sizes.

Carrillo-Spano thinks expanding the program to the entire district is realistically possible in the next 5 to 7 years. If that happens, the Sustainable Food Center will have helped create a giant new market for local food, and that has value to more than just farmers, Smiley thinks.

“When school districts are spending their money with local farmers,” Smiley said, “they are reinvesting in their local communities, which can lead to economic sustainability, or a healthier economic setting in our community.”

Of course, there is the value of improving what kids are eating before obesity and other health issues associated with a poor diet take hold.

“Its really clear that you’ve got to get kids while their young,” said Flynn. “You’ve got to let them experience what fresh food tastes like. If you can intervene in their diet choices early, they’re much more likely to keep that throughout their lives because they learn to value what they eat.”

Lash and the farmers interviewed for this story all felt that farm-to-school has enormous potential to be a benefit to local farmers. They are ready to get involved, as soon as the schools and the program are able to accommodate them.

“We’re like a big ship,” Burke said about AISD. “What we need is a tug boat, to push us along the side, to slowly steer us toward turning in that direction. And that’s what [SFC is] doing for us essentially...pushing us towards serving local and fresh and healthy foods.”

Sprouting Healthy Kids: Teaching Good Habits

When 7th grader Jude Rios signed up for an after-school gardening class at KIPP College Prep in East Austin last year, it was really out of necessity more than an interest in gardens.

“My mom couldn’t pick me up at three on Wednesdays, so I went there to do something instead of just doing homework,” Jude said, during an interview at his house in Bastrop, where he lives with his parents and two sisters.

But once he started learning about healthy eating and where food comes from, Jude was hooked. “I learned how being healthy enables you to live longer,” he said. “Eating unhealthy foods, like lipids or fats, can endanger your life because you can get a disease from them.”

In 2006, the Sustainable Food Center (SFC) started a program called Sprouting Healthy Kids, designed to get local produce into school cafeterias and to educate the students about healthy eating through gardening projects and nutrition education. Education is a crucial part of changing kids’ diets, says Andrew Smiley, Farm Direct Projects Director for SFC.

“Having access to healthy food is one component of the farm-to-school programming,” said Smiley, “but there is also the knowledge about food and food systems, and then the relationship to food and food systems. Because they’re really gaining knowledge and they’re developing positive habits that will be with them their whole lives.”

SFC offers an entire curriculum for the partner schools, and the students involved are visited by local farmers, take field trips to local farms, taste-test in the cafeteria, have

in-class lessons about how the food system functions, and participate in after-school gardening programs.

“It’s not just an entity that’s getting produce, they’re starting a culture,” said Steven Burke, chef for the Austin Independent School District who is working with SFC to incorporate local produce into school meals. “It’s getting the kids that are brown-bag generation familiar with the items that are not in a brown bag, the items that are coming from the ground.”

Twelve elementary and middle schools in the Austin Independent School District, and one charter school (KIPP College Prep) are currently partnering with SFC to offer the Sprouting Healthy Kids program. The positive results of the educational component of the program can be seen in talking with engaged students like Rios, and the teachers who

Melissa Laurel, the Wellness Coordinator for KIPP Austin Public Schools, was too busy to maintain the gardening program she had started, and was close to abandoning it, before she learned about Sprouting Healthy Kids.

“They had the curriculum, they had the shopping lists,” Laurel said. “Things that I hadn’t had time to put into the program, they had done already.”

Laurel says the program helps kids make connections between things they already know about, like the need to reduce fossil fuel consumption, and what that means in terms of food distribution. She has found that the trick to keeping them interested is to keep the message positive.

“They do hear us all day long in a school: rules, rules, rules,” Laurel said. “If I make food another negative experience, they don’t want anything to do with what I have to say. If you come in with a bunch of don’t eat this, don’t eat that, they’re not going to listen. You have to market it to them through the pleasures of food and gardening.”

Laurel said as much as she hopes that the program will improve their eating habits, it's not as simple as just serving them more broccoli. "It really is this big leap of faith: If I teach them what real fresh food tastes like, and they eat it twice a day in the cafeteria, my faith is that eventually it will taste better to them than the bag of Hot Cheetos," she said.

The evidence that the program is effective goes beyond personal experiences. The University of Texas School of Public Health conducted an evaluation of the effects of the program on students in 2008, and found that those who participated in Sprouting Healthy Kids scored higher on evaluations of their knowledge of health, their preference for healthy foods, and their motivations to eat fruits and vegetables. The study also found that students who participated ate, on average, 1.2 servings more of fruits and vegetables per day than non-participants.

The findings in the Evaluation of Sprouting Healthy Kids report stated, "The Farmer visit, Food tasting, and the Classroom lessons are the three intervention components that seem to have had the greatest impact on the study outcome variables."

By all accounts, the educational aspect of the program seems to be working. But what happens when the students leave the school environment?

Laurel points out that even though her students are learning all about healthy eating, ultimately they are not the ones making the final decisions about what they foods are served at home.

"The ten-year-old is not grocery shopping or preparing meals for the family," she said.

SFC is trying to address this issue with The Happy Kitchen/La Cocina Alegre, cooking classes and nutrition education for adults. KIPP is offering these classes for their parents, and Laurel said the demand is great.

“You can’t just teach the kids. It’s got to be a whole community thing,” said Laurel.

Pat Rios, Jude’s mom, took one of the six-week courses offered at the school after seeing her son develop such an interest. In one of the classes they asked her how many times her children saw her eating fruit or vegetables in front of them.

“I realized the importance of me modeling that,” Pat said. “So I’m trying to be better about it.”

And Jude is learning that in order to maintain the healthy lifestyle that is important to him now, he will have to help his mom out. Recently on a car ride home from school he was hungry, but his mom was in a hurry to pick up his sister so she stopped to get him a snack at Whataburger.

“We should only be eating fast food once or twice a week,” Jude said.

“I’m glad he is more aware,” Pat said. “I have to plan better, he has to plan better. We have to have fruit in the car, and healthy snacks.”

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