

Williams College

Applicant: Chander Payne | Class of 2024 | cp11@williams.edu

Project Title: Urban Beet– “Connecting People and the Planet for the Healing of Both”

Country: United States (June–August 2022)

Background

Mattie Stepanek, a poet and peacemaker, once said “peace is possible when our basic needs are met.” My story attests to Mattie’s point. In 2016, I was in 10th grade. I had chronic neck pain due to the stress of seeing my mom bedridden by a disability. One day after school, my mind was racing, and I walked into my family’s vegetable garden. There I saw my dog “Santa, a rescued labrador, digging up a patch of herbs. I allowed her to finish up, then stuck my hands in the ground to undo her work. Feeling the vibrant, powdery soil in my hands brought me a deep sense of peace. Fast forward to 2019. While volunteering in Southeast D.C, where food insecurity is prevalent, I had conversations with people experiencing homelessness and realized that many of them loved gardening. Upon speaking with 15 shelter staff members, I learned that homeless shelters often have empty, unused backyards.

In 2021, Urban Beet’s team of college students worked with 10 homeless shelters to create urban farms in their previously empty backyards. We also hired seven farm managers—members of the shelters’ surrounding communities, some of whom have experienced homelessness—to ensure our farms thrive for years to come. Urban Beet’s farms cultivate healing in three ways. First, they help meet the basic need of shelter residents and all human beings: nourishment. In Washington D.C, 1 in 7 families struggle with food insecurity (Capital Area Food Bank) and 4 in 10 families do not have transportation to access a grocery store (DC Policy Center 2017). Secondly, they give shelter residents access to nature. Many of the people we serve are domestic violence survivors, including an eight-year-old boy from Senegal who inspired me with his curiosity as I tended the soil alongside him. He asked me questions nonstop: “What is this plant?” (lettuce), “How do you stop a bully”? The parallels between the regenerative properties of the soil and the healing of this young boy are undeniable. Thirdly, they foster a sense of community. Twice per season, our farm managers host community workdays, which build community around our common ground: the soil. Workdays incorporate residents’ favorite activities and Urban Beet provides all needed materials. During a workday at SMART house, twenty families did yoga in their garden. Residents of the Latin American Youth Center had a hot pepper eating contest with the peppers from their garden. At Interfaith Works, 20 families carved pumpkins—which they grew onsite—during a Halloween-themed workday.

Vision, Impact, and Timeline

With a Davis Peace Project grant, Urban Beet would co-create 4 urban farms—each 1,000 square feet—with shelters in four new cities: Detroit, Denver, New York City, and Los Angeles. This would empower 200 people experiencing homelessness to grow their own food, nourish their souls through tending the soil, and build community around gardening. We would also hire 4 farm managers to ensure each farm thrives for years to come. By working with Urban Beet, the farm managers would become

potent advocates for the wellbeing of people experiencing homelessness and soil beneath their feet.

Project Preparations: Forging New Partnerships (January—March)

The first step in creating new farms is determining where to build them. For the past four months, our analytics team has been developing an algorithm to generate city-wide food desert maps. In January, they will apply this algorithm to Detroit, Denver, New York, and Los Angeles and create a list of food insecure, nature-deprived neighborhoods. In February, our outreach committee will use this list to identify 20 potential partner shelters. They will meet with shelter staff members to determine partnership feasibility, with an intention of finding places where our farms will thrive for many years. Our board will ultimately select four partner organizations based on three factors: land availability, shelter commitment, and the number of shelter residents served. Our development team will reach out to college environmental clubs and neighborhood garden clubs located near the partner shelters to recruit farm managers.

Project Activities: Planting Seeds of Peace and Sustaining the Healing (March—June)

In early March, our technical committee will create customized farm plans that meet the differential needs of each shelter's residents. For example, if residents want to use the space for yoga, they will design an open space and send them yoga mats. In June, I will travel to the four cities and build each farm alongside the residents and newly-recruited farm managers. Once the raised-beds are built and seeds are sown, the residents and farm managers will begin watering their farms. A sense of community will bloom around each plot. In the Spring and Summer, farm managers will begin holding community workdays: they will facilitate at least two per farm in 2022. To ensure success, our leadership team and farm managers will communicate daily through a shared GroupMe. To ensure sustainability, farm managers will teach regenerative agriculture to residents and encourage them to take ownership of their urban gardens. The knowledge and passion of those we serve will ensure our farms thrive for decades, rather than years, to come.

Personal Qualifications

My goal as a change maker is to help create a global food system that regenerates our common ground: my hero, the soil. I have been pursuing this vision as founder of Urban Beet for the past 5 years. I have received grants from T-Mobile, General Motors, and National Geographic. In the next 5 years, I hope to elevate the untold stories of urban communities experiencing homelessness and food insecurity to emphasize the need for widespread changes in our food system to better nourish those communities.

Budget, Website, and Letters of Support

View project expenses and rationales in [this budget](#). Access photographs of Urban Beet's work on our website, UrbanBeet.org. We will identify our shelter partners for this summer in February. I trust our past partnerships with 10 shelters, as showcased on our website, provides strong evidence of shelter support. After February, letters of support from current partners will follow.

