

Cultivating Peace and Community in West Oakland

Summer 2022 and 2023

Oakland, USA

International House at UC Berkeley

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Summary:

Over the course of the summer of 2022 and 2023, we planned five community days for a West Oakland Community, centered around a local elementary school garden, and brought much needed supplies, art, and infrastructure to ensure lasting growth. Through the sharing of meals, culture, art, gardening, music, books, food distribution, and more we brought together families and other community members to connect with the Earth and one another.

Project Description:

Hoover Elementary school in West Oakland, USA, is located less than 5 miles away from the International House at UC Berkeley. Yet, there are stark differences between the environment and resources that the communities of UC Berkeley and West Oakland have access to. West Oakland is highly diverse with strong African American and Latinx histories but has also been subject to decades of racist policies that separate the communities of color from access to nature, healthy foods, housing security, and other resources. As a result, many families struggle and the population of Hoover Elementary reflects the community they are in. 100% of the 268 students, aged five through 11, have a low enough socioeconomic status to qualify for free or subsidized school lunches. For context, a family of four must make less than \$34,000 a year to qualify for free school meals. 13% of those students are newcomers, meaning that they arrived in the United States less than 3 years ago.

I first was exposed to these differences when I student taught at Hoover Elementary in 2018 and formed close bonds with teachers and students. Their community was one in need, yet they gave me so much support and taught me how to be a better educator both in the classroom and in the community. I continue to be inspired by the love and care the school shows its students and the broader community. I also fell in love with the small, yet dearly loved community garden. In a neighborhood lacking in green spaces, this garden is a beautiful gift for those that visit and give time and energy to helping the garden grow. When you give to the garden, the garden will always give to you and teachers and volunteers run it to share with all members of the community. I decided to apply to the Davis Project for Peace grant to give back to a community that showed me so much love and support and continues to support some of the most vulnerable children in Oakland.

My time at Hoover showed me that the West Oakland and Hoover communities face many barriers. The many who have recently immigrated to the area face even higher barriers to accessing resources, such as access to healthy food and green spaces. Environmentally racist policies have created high levels of air pollution that have dire effects on young children and others. Children under 5 in West Oakland are 1.5 times more likely to be taken to the emergency room for severe asthma than in the rest of Alameda County and the life expectancy is 7.5 years less. It was clear that the relationship between the Earth and the international communities of West Oakland needed to be healed. The Davis Project for Peace grant was aimed at bringing the Hoover Garden to its full potential by having intensive gardening days, investing in supplies, and bringing community members together with food and connections to the earth.

During the Summer of 2022, we hosted a series of summer camp days on Saturdays (June 4th and 11th) for Hoover Elementary Students at the garden, culminating in a large-scale community garden day for Juneteenth on June 18th. We purchased plants, books, and supplies for the garden that will be used by the community even after the Summer. All community days provided families and other members of the community with a meal to share with each other and donated food for those who otherwise struggle with getting fresh, healthy produce and other groceries. Teachers at Hoover expressed that their library was lacking in African American stories and we were able to donate many stories that represented African Americans, as well as tell the story of Juneteenth. Many elementary school students, their families, teachers, and community members attended the three garden days with over 100 people attending our Juneteenth celebration. On all three community days children and adults painted slate tiles with messages of peace, love, their culture, or images of nature. The slate tiles were crucial to “rat-proof” the chicken coop and make the garden feel more like home.

There were many families, community members, and organizations that helped us create the successful community days. On June 4th we gave families funds and time to cook meaningful dishes and share them with the community. On June 11th, we partnered with StopWaste, and put on a “Mama Wanda” zero waste cookoff, featuring three students and three parents partnering up to cook a delicious meal with donated food and fresh produce from the garden for the judges. Students and families had a blast getting creative cooking healthy meals with food that otherwise would have gone to waste. The audience had a blast eating the food! We also partnered with Oakland Natives Give Back and the Oakland Public Library. Oakland Natives Give Back tabled at all three of our community days, providing information about their programs to address chronic absenteeism in the Oakland Unified School District including directly giving families money for students attendance rates. The Oakland Public Library tabled on June 18th, giving students and families free age appropriate books. Children then read these books and Juneteenth books in the garden, learning about the importance of the holiday and spending healing time with nature. Much more occurred over the course of our garden days. Overall, the community days allowed for community

members to receive valuable resources, connect with nature and other community members, learn, and feel joy which in itself can be a radical act.

Due to problems with the release of funds we only received half of the total grant allowance. Therefore, the project remained on hold until the summer of 2023 after the full funds had been distributed.

During the summer of 2023, we continued hosting garen days where West Oakland families could gather and bond over gardening, fresh food, and music. The “Back to School” garden day on September 9th, was our largest gathering. We were able to celebrate connections with each other in the garden and have a great start to the 2023-2024 school year!

Our work in the Summer of 2023, however, was largely focused on getting much-needed supplies and infrastructure into the garden. A shed filled with gardening tools for both adults and children were purchased, along with a sturdy lock to ensure their safety. Now, community members in the garden will not need to bring their own tools or try to tackle gardening projects without proper tools and gloves. Child-sized tools will also allow children to participate further and learn how to grow native plants. Roofing for a wooden structure over log benches was purchased to allow shade. This roofing will also be used to repair the chicken coop. Other supplies was also purchased to help take care of these beloved chickens. Two local artists, Shani Zhang, and Ivan were contracted to create a mural in the garden, replacing broken painted wooden panels that had been decaying for years.

Davis Projects for Peace and the International House at UC Berkeley, have allowed for invaluable investment in a community that has persevered through innumerable hardships and disinvestment. This investment will allow the garden to prosper further, serve more families, and will last for many years to come. It is a valuable space for healing and connection to our Earth that will be a small but mighty part of creating a more peaceful world.

Reflection:

To me, peace is community. It means humans loving other humans for their similarities *and* their differences. It is taking care of each other and showing through your actions that you wish health and happiness to others. My project was able to give valuable resources to a community that is already loving but struggling to meet their basic needs. It is a community that loves each other, but doesn't get love from institutions that have underfunded them and subject them to environmental toxins due to a long history of racism. This project was able to help heal some of that hurt that has been inflicted, helping the community connect with each other and the earth through gardening and fun events. This garden is a long term investment, one that will last a very long time. My project was short, but its impacts will be felt through the

art, plants, and supplies that will continue to support those that visit. Children and community members who have learned from the garden will keep those feelings with them and spread peace with the earth and each other.

This community has taught me a great deal about what it means to belong to a community, especially against adversity. It has taught me what I want schools to look and feel like which I will take with me for the rest of my life as a teacher. My values have been shaped and I feel incredibly grateful that I was able to support this wonderful community.

Personal Statement

I believe that schools are the center of a community and there is nothing more precious than supporting your community. In the Summer of 2022 and 2023 I was able to give back to a community that welcomed and inspired me while learning to be a teacher. We also brought in much needed supplies, art, and infrastructure that will also allow the garden to prosper for many years. We put on community days, spent in the beautiful school garden, and filled with the sharing of meals, culture, art, gardening, music, books, food distribution, and more. Most importantly, we brought together families and other community members to connect with the Earth and one another.

- Paulina Tarr (USA)