

Oasis Detroit: A Communal Approach to Life in a Food Desert

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Summary

This project aimed to expand a community fridge and pantry with the addition of a community garden. While I was not able to integrate the two, I was able to have both a community fridge and community garden that mutually benefited one another and provided much-needed support for those who are food insecure in my community.

Project Description

An oasis is a fertile spot in a desert where refreshment and nourishment are found. In 2020, I decided I no longer wanted to stand by and watch my neighborhood suffer due to skyrocketing homelessness and extreme hunger, a byproduct of Covid-19. With the help of other local nonprofits and my city council members, I launched Oasis Detroit, a community fridge and pantry dedicated to hunger and education.

Much of urban Detroit is a food desert. A food desert is an area where access to affordable and fresh food is severely limited. As the coronavirus outbreak ran rampant through Detroit, many homeless shelters within a 25-mile radius of my zip code paused intake to manage potential outbreaks. While the pause made sense and was consistent with the universal “pause” the entire world faced during 2020, it left many people out on the street in need of meals.

A community garden is a space where the community comes together to cultivate land and crops for everyone's gain. This expansion I created bridged the gap between Oasis as merely a resource and its potential as a place of community bonding. I brought the crops we grew to folks who are sick or shut in, and I prepared hot and cold meals for those who were unable to do so themselves. I desired for the garden to be an educational experience for children and adults who have no gardening experience. Lastly, I aimed to use part of my funding to allocate micro scholarships to local students who commit themselves to helping grow the garden.

I aspire for this garden to also be a source of beauty and pride. Due to bankruptcy, gentrification, and unsafe housing conditions, Detroit has been a hotspot for demolition. The garden is thus an opportunity to offer a breath of fresh air. It can be a source of pride for all who participate in and benefit from it. A place where people can come to admire the work of the community coming together to fight against a single goal—food insecurity.

I invested in crops that are known staples in Black and Brown communities, such as potatoes, collard greens, corn, cabbage, avocados, tomatoes, and beans. I also hope to expand the community's exposure to holistic herbs and spices, such as cinnamon, sage, fenugreek, and echinacea, to promote holistic health practices originally cultivated by our African ancestors.

Reflection

This summer, I experienced extreme trials and tribulations with my project. To begin to explain this experience, I applied for a physical lot in the city of Detroit in February, long before I received funding. I paid for acquisition of the lot in May, and I have heard nothing back from the city of Detroit since. I have gone in person, I have reached out via email, I have called every day for weeks and have heard nothing back. It has been an extremely frustrating process; however, I believe this has opened the door for an even bigger yes.

In June, my church agreed to allow me to move my entire community fridge and pantry to our brand-new church grounds in Grosse Pointe, Michigan. This was a huge step in the right direction, as it gave us ready access to electricity and full cover for the refrigerator (I've had complications in the past because of weather affecting the fridge). Little did I know at the time, my church also planned to launch an early childhood education center this fall, less than 100 feet from the refrigerator. This was the absolute perfect aligning for the community fridge, as it will serve exactly who my original vision sought to reach: Black families, specifically low-income families with children. To make matters even better, the center provides meals several times a day to children, so their access to food will now be repurposed as

meals and ingredients inside the fridge. The entire process worked out exactly how it was supposed to, regardless of the trials and tribulations I endured to get to this place.

I also was forced to adjust my plans for the community garden as well. I was lucky to have parents who constantly supported my vision and helped me with execution. My family, from oldest siblings on down, worked together to help me fully till and prepare our backyard for a make-shift community garden in late May. We were able to plant corn, cucumbers, several types of peppers, beans, and onions, several herbs in a greenhouse, flowers, okra, collard greens, and several types of lettuce. I was then able to do a late harvest along with donations from a local community garden that I created a partnership with to stock the fridge. We had so much of an abundance of produce that we began to walk around and pass out bags of produce. This also has helped create much-needed exposure of the garden to those in need within the community.

Big things are coming up next for Oasis Detroit. Between the new relationship between the early childhood center (Lively Stones) and the new location, along with the relationships built between preexisting nonprofits, I have achieved sustainability throughout this experience. I now have organizations that will continue to donate and support my cause until I decide to expand or move on to another form of community activism and volunteerism. I now have a consistent food donation avenue that is already closely monitored for food code and safety regulations. I now have families who will pass by the fridge every single day and will have the opportunity to take it with no shame or fear. I now have something to plan for next summer. This is truly the optimal position to be in, to think about continued work. I could expand to a full-size pantry with more than food. I could use land on site to expand to a garden that's closer and more accessible to the community rather than having to transport. I am excited to see what the future holds for Oasis Detroit after this summer. After gaining the experience and the knowledge I have as well as the connections I've gained, I am certain that next year will be even more of an asset to the community.

Personal Statement

This summer was a learning experience and a test of how much I was willing to endure to serve my community. For several weeks, I felt like everything was going wrong and nothing was moving forward. My timeline was shifted and pushed back, I had major repairs to the fridge, I had problems with permits and training for proper food handling, and many more challenges. However, I knew that this was a project I'd aspired to achieve for months and when all went left, I continued to press forward and troubleshoot. I also truly learned to ask for help. This vision has been something I started fully alone, in a pandemic, and it became my baby. It was hard for me to ask for help, but I was pressed against a wall this summer. I had no choice but to ask for help from others, and others saved my project. I was able to connect with several local organizations, such as The Genesis Aftermath, Keep Growing Detroit, Virginia Park Community Gardens, Lasalle Gardens Neighborhood Club, and the local farmers market. Each of these organizations played such a pivotal role in troubleshooting, problem solving, getting in contact with different contacts at the city of Detroit and launching this project, as well as agreeing to a consistent schedule of donations/local pick-ups and drop-offs until the end of this year.