

Participating University: Furman University

Project Title: Planting Peace with Police

Student Project Leader: Ava MacHeledt

Dates of Project Execution: Spring 2021 - Early Fall 2021

Location: Greenville, SC, USA

Overview: “Planting Peace with Police” aims to mediate conflict and de-escalate tension existing between law enforcement and minority youth in the Greenville, South Carolina community. This tension is not new or exclusive to the Greenville community, but has been inflamed nationally within the past year. My approach to this conflict centers on the grounding and enriching activity of farming. My vision is to bring together the officers of the Greenville Police Department (GPD) and the youth staff of Mill Village Farms (MVF) to farm alongside each other while facilitating crucial conversations about race, identity, and conflict resolution. Mill Village Farms is a local organization focused on community development through the employment of low-income, often minority, high school students to work on one of their three farm locations, all the while developing critical skills that will help them as they prepare to enter the workforce or further education. The produce grown is then funneled back into the community in areas where fresh, affordable produce is not accessible. The GPD/MVF partnership would exist with additional insight and guidance from Greenville’s Citizens Advisory Panel on Public Safety, who within the past year have conducted research on the presence and perceptions of the GPD in the community.

I envision overseeing my project from Greenville, South Carolina since it will be implemented here. Tentatively, the project itself would run from the second week of June to the second week of August, since this is when the teens of Mill Village Farm’s Youth Employment Program work. However, my behind-the-scenes work would begin as soon as funding becomes available, so everything runs without a hitch in June.

Project Goals: At the center of this project are the goals of police interaction within the community and productive communication between police and Greenville’s minority youth with the ultimate end goal of decreased tensions and increased mutual trust and understanding. Police would work alongside Mill Village Farm’s teen staff throughout the summer on a boxed garden plot dedicated to this partnership on one of MVF’s existing farm sites. Naturally, conversation will occur between the police officers and teens as they work alongside each other. This conversation does not necessarily have to be about the tough topics surrounding conflict. I believe that casual chat while working to achieve a common goal has the potential to organically develop into more meaningful discussion that bonds two opposing sides. As professionals, the police officers can contribute to the teenagers’ workplace development and provide insight to a career path that may be interesting to them. At the same time, the teenagers will have the opportunity to share their lived experiences as a way to expand the police officers’ perception of the teens.

We will also facilitate structured conversation about conflict mediation and expression of perspectives. With part of my funding, I will host a conflict mediation specialist to speak to our group of police officers

and teens to facilitate productive conversation. Specifically, I would work with Speaking Down Barriers, a Spartanburg based organization focused on promoting healing and justice among communities through professional-led workshops of DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) education. The culmination of the “Planting Peace with Police” project will be an end of summer meal where our teens, police officers and staff will gather at the table to enjoy the literal fruits of their labor. My intention is for the meal to be cooked featuring the produce from their garden, however any meal in general would present another environment for community development, discussion and bonding.

With the nature of the times, alternate plans must be in place with consideration to COVID-19 and maintaining the health of our community. Regardless of the circumstances, CDC recommendations for COVID-19 prevention will be followed by everyone on site. Masks and gloves will always be worn, 6 feet of distance maintained, as well as wellness and temperature checks before entering the site. Since the activity is outside, social distance is easy to abide by. In the event that Mill Village Farms is not operating due to a COVID spike and the project has to be remote, gardening and discussion will still occur. Instead of the farming occurring in the community garden, the gardening will be done at home with indoor garden kits that I will deliver to the GPD and the teens who would otherwise be working on Mill Village Farms. Workshops with Speaking Down Barriers would take place over Zoom. While this is certainly not ideal and still has room to be developed, I think it still is a viable way to adapt the project. However, I am cautiously optimistic that Mill Village Farms will be operating as normal, since their summer teen program ran during the summer of 2020.

Determining Project Impact: Since conflict and peace are abstract in nature, it is difficult to quantifiably measure them. I believe the best way to assess the temperature of perspectives from both sides is through a survey administered before and after the project. This survey will be created and distributed through the platform Qualtrics. Questions will gauge opinion of respondents and record answers on a 5-point Likert scale. Interviews of participants conducted after the end of the project would complement these surveys and provide details that cannot be obtained through surveys alone.

Ensuring Project Sustainability: I am confident that my project will result in a lasting peace since the experience provided through “Planting Peace with Police” will uniquely and indefinitely shape the perspectives of those involved and take roots of peace within the community. I believe the trust and bonds formed will proliferate, as participants share their experiences with friends, family, and neighbors. If I have the opportunity to make my vision a reality, I will ensure its sustainability past the first year and funding phase. Since I am a junior in college, I still have a little over another year in Greenville. Next summer, I will initiate the second year of “Planting Peace with Police”. The physical structure of the garden will always be intact and ready for community growth and new relationships to be formed with each harvest.