

Seeds for Peace
United States of America
Union College
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The goal of Seeds for Peace is to build a community garden in Schenectady, New York in partnership with local non-profit COCOA (Children of Our Community Open to Achievement) House. The garden is in the backyard of COCOA House and will serve as an educational tool for local students, as well as a food source for all community members. COCOA House is in the Hamilton Hill neighborhood of Schenectady; its mission is to provide after-school mentoring and homework help to local students in kindergarten through fifth grade.

The Projects for Peace funds also contributed to spearheading COCOA House's larger vision of building ten urban gardens in the next five years in and around Hamilton Hill for the community. As such, the funds not spent on the original backyard urban garden were placed into an account for COCOA House, to be spent on turning a recently purchased vacant lot into one of the ten urban gardens over the next year.

The project was inspired both by my time at COCOA House with the students and inside classrooms at Union, where I learned the complexities and pervasiveness of food insecurity. The students at COCOA House were interested in, but had limited access to, fresh fruits and vegetables. As a child, I learned how food was grown by watching my grandfather cultivate a tiny vegetable garden in our backyard. Because it was accessible and I was an active participant, I was invested in its success. I hoped that this would be replicable for the students at COCOA House. When I met with Will Rivas, the executive director of the nonprofit, he was receptive to starting a garden in COCOA House's backyard. Later, Will shaped his vision of building multiple urban gardens in Schenectady to address economic and food insecurity in the neighborhood. Will's dream is much larger than the singular backyard garden I had originally proposed – he hopes to also start a weekly farmer's market so community members can sell the food they grow. The gardens are also a financial literacy tool for younger students – by cultivating and selling their own produce, children can learn the basics of small business and making smart investments with their money.

This project addresses food insecurity, which is at the nexus of many structural, historical, and social issues that Hamilton Hill faces. Schenectady is one of many rust belt cities in America; specifically, it was affected by the arrival and exit of General Electric, which was headquartered in the city and at one point one of its biggest employers. The company began to cut jobs in the 1970s and 80s, which led to increased job insecurity. Today, Schenectady faces high poverty and homelessness rates. According to the 2020 Schenectady County Needs Assessment, 77% of students in the Schenectady City School District are economically disadvantaged. The city's unemployment rate is 9.2%, which is greater than the county and New York State rates (6.6% and 6%, respectively; SCAP 2020).

The original project proposal included an educational component as part of the summer curriculum at COCOA House. However, with COVID-19, the House faced obstacles in fully reopening its doors to the children this summer. Additionally, construction was occurring intermittently at the site this summer, which posed a potential danger to the children. Fortunately, there were a few afternoons where I spent time with the children, who helped water the plants and weed. We also explored their favorite fruits and vegetables and did some arts and crafts. My advice to future PFP grantees given my experience is to ensure that their plans are flexible and to have a backup plan. I also encourage future grantees to view challenges as opportunities, not roadblocks. Without the educational component, we could afford a landscaper and higher quality materials that were more weather resistant. Another challenge was the timing – garden preparations begin in early spring, but funds were not yet available. As soon as the funds arrived, I ordered materials and began to prepare the soil. Planning the garden was also challenging. Because I have limited experience in starting a garden from scratch, I reached out to several gardeners and landscape architects who have experience in the field. They were an invaluable resource and helped greatly in the planning and execution of the garden. Additionally, at the start of the project, Will was in the middle of purchasing a separate property from the city located around the corner from COCOA House. We were hoping to turn that lot into a second urban garden this summer, and we agreed to use the Davis funds for that lot as well. However, there were challenges in officially acquiring the property, even though their bid was approved mid-July. I had hoped to begin working on the vacant lot this summer – to put up

fencing, start the clean-up process, and get the soil tested – but at the time of writing this report the closing process has not yet been completed. As a result, around \$6,000 of the funds were transferred to a COCOA House account to use once the property is officially theirs. In the meantime, we met with numerous gardeners and experts to plan out the procedure for turning the vacant lot into a garden. We created a proposed breakdown of the remaining funds and secured more permanent help for COCOA House for their five-year urban garden plan. One of the largest components of the project was cultivating relationships with experts and asking for their advice. The experts were very approachable and more than happy to help, but busy with their own projects and limited in their time. One of the biggest challenges was finding someone who would stay on more permanently after summer ends to oversee the first garden and the future gardens. Melissa McKinnon from another Schenectady nonprofit, SiCM (Schenectady Inner City Ministries), was an incredibly useful guide for planning the layout of the vacant lot, and she has agreed to guide us in the future. Another resource, Mary Moore Wallinger, a landscape architect at Land Art Studios in Schenectady, was also invaluable in helping with the design and layout of the current garden and the vacant lot. Both experts provided advice, resources, and contacts that ensured the success of not only the original garden, but the future gardens as well.

When I began this project, its main goal was to bring individual peace in the form of food security and educational opportunities. Food is one of the most basic necessities for human survival, and without a nutritious diet, adults and children alike cannot reach their full potential. Peace is knowing that healthy food is accessible and affordable, and not having to worry where your next meal will come from. The complete backyard garden fulfills this aspect of peace, but throughout the process of building it, we also strengthened community ties and cultivated stronger relationships with other local groups that have a similar goal. We built a stronger connection to Melissa, who is the director of Schenectady Urban Farms at SiCM. We met with the head gardener at Central Park in Schenectady, and he will also be an invaluable guide in the future. The original concept of individual peace has broadened to community and collective peace not just with local experts, but neighbors and Hamilton Hill residents. As work was being done, community members would stop by. Will put it best: “They realize that something is happening in their neighborhood, something visible that will bring good change.” Neighbors came by to pick up extra soil and strawberry plants. Steve, a longtime resident across the street, offered a helping hand whenever we were working, and let us use his water while our outdoor source was undergoing construction.

In the long-term, the urban gardens will give residents power to grow and harvest their own food, decreasing dependence on outside food aid organizations. It will also be an economic resource for community members and an educational tool for students. Instead of traveling to other neighborhoods to learn about gardening, or going across town to visit Schenectady’s farmer’s market, the community has the power to do it in their own neighborhood, on their own terms. Another component of the long-term plan is preventing gentrification. Already, large corporations are looking to purchase vacant lots from the city to turn into new complexes and buildings. This would raise the rent prices and effectively cause residents to move out of their neighborhood. By purchasing the vacant lots as a local non-profit and turning them into community gardens, COCOA House gives power back to the original residents, so they can build the community on their own terms.

When I started this project, I had learned about gentrification, poverty, and the inherent inequality of capitalism in abstract ways in the classroom. I didn’t understand how to create solutions, nor did I want to be the outsider trying to “save” a community without any ties to it. Working with Will and hearing his vision showed me that change must come from within a neighborhood. I deliberately allowed him to guide the direction of the project because he understands the community much better than I ever will.

Personal Statement: The Davis Projects for Peace provided an opportunity for COCOA House to begin its vision of creating true community urban gardens for the people. It taught me how to build lasting relationships and the importance of community spirit. -- Jessalyn Li

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