

Title: Seeds for Peace

Context The World Health Organization defines health as “a state of complete physical, social, and mental well-being, not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” Similarly, peace is not merely the absence of physical conflict. The seeds of peace are sown by having enough resources to meet basic needs. Every person has a right to life without the internal strife associated with worrying about their next meal or affording rent.

In communities like Hamilton Hill in Schenectady, NY, residents struggle daily with poverty and its ramifications. Impoverishment leads to high crime rates in the area, creating dangerous streets for the children. Many of Hamilton Hill’s children come from broken homes with incarcerated or single parents. For them, poverty is amplified by living in a food desert with limited access to healthy foods. As a student going into public health, I believe that health and peace go hand in hand. During my freshman year, an anthropology professor encouraged us to go into the community to learn about the area. Instead of visiting a shelter or food pantry like my peers, I decided to ask the residents of Hamilton Hill where they got their food. As I knocked on doors and spoke to passersby, the answer became abundantly clear: the bodegas and corner stores. Hamilton Hill doesn’t have a grocery store, and many residents lacked the resources to travel to the closest one. Schenectady’s high rates of food insecurity are caused in part by the increase in unemployment after General Electric, once one of the largest employers in Schenectady, began slashing jobs by the thousands in the 1960s and 70s. The reverberations are still felt today, as evidenced by the boarded-up storefronts and quiet downtown streets.

SiCM (Schenectady Community Ministries) is a nonprofit composed of over 50 congregations that focus on social service and social justice. They operate a food pantry and a summer meals program for children in Schenectady. Another pillar of the community is the COCOA (Children of Our Community Open to Achievement) House, an after-school and summer day program for elementary-aged students. COCOA House was started by a Union alumni in 2003. The House provides a warm, safe place for children to reach their fullest potential through homework help, academic enrichment, and compassionate mentors. Union students are the main mentors, volunteering their time and holding fundraisers to keep its doors open. I was a mentor at the House my freshman year and I worked closely with the children twice a week. They often came in hungry and weary, worried about money or their parents’ jobs. The conflict they are born into manifests in their behavior in school and at COCOA House. The children would get upset and frustrated at small things, only to reveal later that their families are struggling. It’s no surprise that hungry children without a stable home and peaceful community cannot thrive. In 2019, the House started a summer program that runs from 12 pm - 5pm and serves lunch, but there are no childcare options for the morning hours. In addition, with fewer Union students on campus in the summer, the school does not provide transportation for Union volunteers and the summer students have a less robust program than during the school year. Therefore, COCOA House needs a sustainable solution to run a holistic summer program for the children when Union is not in session.

Vision The goal of my project is to build a community garden at the COCOA House over the summer, which will empower students to learn about healthy foods, where they come from, and how they can make healthier choices. I also hope to create a permanent summer public health internship at the house for Union students. The intern would be responsible for helping out around the House, serving meals, and overseeing the garden. They would work with William Rivas, the Director of COCOA House, who already has a robust summer curriculum planned. The internship position will be posted via Handshake, Union’s job search platform. Students be chosen by William through an interview process.

Because the children come from disadvantaged backgrounds, most of them are exposed to conflict at home. The children need a dependable, peaceful, and safe place that serves warm meals and an understanding ear when it feels like their worlds are crumbling. Over the summer, without the support and social networks that school provides, the children especially need the COCOA House. Gardening is also a physical activity with numerous mental health benefits, which will help the children work through their frustrations and emotions. Along with physically gardening, students will learn about living a peaceful, healthful lifestyle. The intern from Union will hold workshops about healthy eating, stress management, and how to make healthy choices. Many students are interested in public health at Union, and this would be an opportunity for them to learn more about the field and strengthen ties between the school and community. I will try to secure additional funding for future interns through alumni relations

and other Union College channels. The project will bring together the youth of Hamilton Hill and students of Union College with the goal of bringing peace to the community.

Additional funds will be set aside in an account for COCOA House's future use to help purchase seeds, seedlings, fertilizer, and other gardening supplies that must be replenished annually. Union College students from Octopus's Garden, the club that cultivates Union's on-campus organic vegetable garden, will also volunteer with at the COCOA House garden. Octopus's Garden always has one to two students on campus over the summer to maintain the on-campus garden, and the club has agreed to work with us to plan and cultivate this garden. While the intern would oversee all aspects of the House, the Octopus's Garden volunteers would help a few hours a week with the gardening only.

I also plan to help extend the program hours from five hours per day to eight. This summer, I hope to start a morning workshop so that SiCM can serve breakfast. This would incentivize the children to come and relieve their parents of the stress of finding morning childcare.

Project Starting in early May, I will meet with William and SiCM to plan the garden. After the garden is planned, we will start the backyard clean-up process with help from Union College's Octopus's Garden Club and the COCOA House children. Because the students are still in school until late June, we will start planting the seeds during the last three weeks of the afterschool program to ensure a timely harvest. Students will also document their experiences in journals. The curriculum will be an addition to the pre-existing summer curriculum that William has already decided. The students will take an hour or so each day to learn the new food and health curriculum, which will be taught by the intern and William. In the first and second weeks, students will learn some basic biology about how plants grow. In the third and fourth weeks, we will talk about healthy eating and how to make healthy, cost-effective snacks. This information will be compiled into brochures to take home to share with their families. During the fifth and sixth weeks, we will discuss the importance of a healthy lifestyle, including sleep, exercise, stress, and emotion management. During the seventh and eighth weeks, students will share their favorite foods and write about their favorite memories surrounding those foods, as well as learn about the logistics of food systems: how food goes from farms to supermarkets to their table. During the ninth and tenth weeks, students will explore how to grow their own herb gardens at home and ultimately bring home an herb of their own choice home to grow, as well as reflect on everything they learned. All ten weeks will touch upon the theme of cultivating peace, both within themselves and in their relationships.

Sustainability The tools and equipment purchased will be used in future years to maintain the garden. Seeds from the harvest will be preserved for future years. Additional funds will be placed into a COCOA House account for future summers for the purchase of more fertilizer, seeds, seedlings, and maintenance of equipment. The COCOA House also needs a new backyard fence to keep animals and prying eyes out. The House is located in an urban area with substantial foot traffic. For security reasons, a portion of the budget will go towards replacing their old fence so strangers will not be able to see the children in the backyard. Finally, as older students phase out of the COCOA House program, they will be encouraged to return during their summers to work with the younger students. Union College will also have students in residence every summer. The students will be encouraged to volunteer via email and campus poster advertisements. Their transportation to and from the house would be paid for through a contract with Union College's Transportation Office. There will also be one paid internship position for a Union College student (not me), and I will try to secure additional funding for future summer interns through Union. The topics we cover will be saved, along with materials so that future summer volunteers may use it. With longer hours and a permanent intern, COCOA House will be a sustainable summer option for Hamilton Hill children who need a peaceful place to be.

Impact While the garden itself may be small, its impact will not be. By showing children that they can grow something, they will realize they are capable. They will learn not only to care for others, but *how* to care, promoting peace and patience to all aspects of their lives. By providing access to healthy meals, students will be better equipped to learn and play, even when school is not in session. As the program grows, I hope to engage all groups in the community. As the COCOA House strengthens its roots, it will bring a community together to foster its youth, who will go on to achieve great things in this world.

Biographical Information I am a junior with a biology and anthropology interdisciplinary major at Union College who currently volunteers at SiCM and has experience at COCOA House. I plan to work as a volunteer at COCOA House in the spring to rebuild my rapport with the children. I am also a Big Sister in the Big Brothers Big Sisters program and a volunteer at the SCAP Head Start program. In the future, I plan to work in public health, a field I am very passionate about.