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### Community Gardens: Breathing Life into Youngstown

Introduction:

I have driven down Canfield Road countless times over the last sixteen years. I have always liked a particular two-story brick house, with an attached car-port on the left-hand side of the house. It stands alone on one and a half acres of land in the south-side of Youngstown neighborhood known as Idora Park. A couple of years ago I noticed that nobody was living there anymore. There was no for sale sign in the yard but the curtains were all gone and there was a large tree down in the front of the house. It stayed like that for several months and the grass grew taller as nobody was tending to it. Today the property has been cleaned up and is being maintained as it is home to The Iron Roots Urban Farm.

I hoped that someone would buy the house on Canfield Road and take good care of it so that it would not suffer the same fate that so many other homes in that neighborhood have over the years, as well as in many other cities around the world. I would have hated to see it end up as a run-down house or even worse...a drug house where drug users would go to get their "fix" and ultimately defile the house and property. The property could have become a dumping ground for trash, old tires, old furniture and the like. Had it suffered that fate, children could have ended up playing there and probably get hurt in the process.

Last spring I was driving by the house and noticed that someone had cleaned up the large tree that had fallen over the previous autumn. Also, someone had installed what looked like signs, in the windows, made to resemble decorative window treatments that dressed up the windows without allowing people to see inside the house. Soon after, there was a large area that was tilled up on the left-hand side lot. I wondered if they were going to make a garden. I also wondered why it still looked like nobody lived there. It was not long before it was obvious that indeed a garden was growing. It reminded me of the house that we lived in when my mom and stepfather first moved in together. It was also a two-story on a large lot with an additional large lot, but on the right-hand side of the house. We also had a very large garden there that we spent many hours pulling weeds. I did not like having to weed the garden but I did enjoy the harvest. Nothing tastes as good as fresh produce that is grown in a garden rather than being trucked into the stores from out of state or even out of the country. Plus it was fun to watch the food grow.

Perhaps that is what initially sparked my interest in my research question. Also the fact that I lived in the Idora Park neighborhood for several years before my mom and step-father met, and I remember how nice it used to be. About the time that this semester began, I noticed that someone had put up a greenhouse. Now there is no doubt that I am very curious as to what is going on at this property. If it turned out to be a private home, then it would be none of my business. Lady luck was on my side because I found out from a colleague of mine that it is owned by a group called Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation (Y.N.D.C.).

In addition to many other programs that Y.N.D.C. has available to help people and improve neighborhoods, I discovered that they create community gardens. They had purchased the property on Canfield Road and started a community garden. They recently put up a

greenhouse but I am not sure what all they will use it for. I had heard of community gardens before although I do not know a lot about them ...yet.



The Iron Roots Urban Farm on Canfield Rd., summer 2011 (Chilcote)



Participants of the Idora Park Community Gardens (Chilcote)



In this study, I want to explore how community gardens help to clean up, strengthen and revitalize communities. I expect to find that a community garden makes good use of a vacant property as well as bring residents together in and out of the garden. I expect to find decreases in crime and increases in community improvements. I am curious to see if the community gardens will inspire residents to clean up their own properties and if it may draw new businesses to Youngstown.

#### Literature Review:

I chose to find out more about this program to satisfy my own curiosity. Tearing down abandoned houses is a costly job that in a lot of cases is unfairly left up to the city to contract and pay for. Abandoned houses and unclean empty lots affect the people of the neighborhood in several ways as discussed in "Community Gardening" by Ericka Lewis et al. First it lowers the property values, costing the residents money if they were to sell their homes (Lewis et al 382). It creates a dangerous neighborhood to live in because the crime increases due to the abandoned homes being used as drug-houses and other criminal activity, drugs being sold in these

neighborhoods, people stealing to buy drugs, and people acquiring guns to defend themselves and/or to use in their criminal activity (Lewis et al 382). People fear for their lives because of the violence, especially the shootings we hear about all the time which seem like an almost daily occurrence. People stop going outside and socializing with their neighbors, instead they stay indoors where they feel safer. The effects on people living in such a negative environment can be harmful to their overall health.

Lewis et al states that “The act of volunteerism can have positive mental, psychological, and social effects on individuals” (382). This study examines how floral and vegetable garden programs revitalize primarily distressed areas and also the impact it has on the volunteers and the residents of the communities where these programs are. Lewis et al found that the more participants there are, the more the participants are motivated to help each other and also volunteer in other activities that help to strengthen the community (394).

Lewis et al describes several benefits of the community gardening programs namely, improving the local food supplies, fixing up vacant lots and bringing neighbors together (379). Lewis et al states that “Community gardening has also been used to combat crime and address urban decay” (379). Lewis et al found that the residents were really eager to work together in the gardens and also to end the blight in their communities through beautification efforts, crime-watch programs, and tree planting (397-98). Through their efforts, their neighbors want to make improvements to their own properties thus decreasing litter and increasing community pride (Lewis et al 397-98).

Sonja M.E. van Dillen et al looks at community gardens from a different perspective in “Allotment Gardening”. van Dillen et al focuses on the health benefits of active allotment

gardeners compared to a control group of people that do not have an allotment (3-4), which unfairly assumes that people without an allotment are not eating fresh produce, that they do not get any exercise and that people with an allotment are only getting exercise while working in the garden. I do not have access to a garden nor the time to tend to a garden, but I do have access to fresh produce. I prefer to buy produce at a farmer's market because I like knowing that it is fresh and locally grown. I stopped eating canned fruits and vegetables several years ago as an experiment to see if fresh and/or frozen really tasted better. I discovered that there really is a difference. I have not consumed canned fruit or vegetables since unless it was home canned and sealed in glass jars. I do not miss the metallic taste of aluminum canned goods.

Liz Rilveria et al further explores the overall health benefits of community gardens in "Community Gardens" and states that "Community Gardens enhance nutrition and physical activity and promote the role of public health in improving quality of life" (1435). Rilveria et al explains that community gardens are appealing to a variety of people for a variety of reasons (1435). Some people are committed to sustaining a healthy lifestyle for themselves and their families but may have limited or no access to grocery stores and/or farmer's markets (Rilveria et al 1435). Community gardens programs help build communities through teaching skills that residents can also use in combating other problems in the community, and increase public health awareness through "organized community-centered activities" (Rilveria et al 1435). Whatever the reason people choose for getting involved, these programs can empower residents with the knowledge and skills they need to work together to take their communities back, with the additional benefit of improving their diets and overall health.

Rilveria et al also discusses how beneficial the community garden initiatives have been in enabling cities to enact "policies for interim land and complimentary water use," improving

access to fresh produce, increasing public health awareness, providing education and training for programs offered and strengthening communities (1435). I am hoping that this will be the case in Youngstown. It is heartbreaking to see the city that I was born and raised in decaying while remembering how beautiful, strong and vibrant she once was.

Rilveria et al states “[n]ewly arriving immigrants can maintain cultural traditions” (1435). I like the idea that in addition to establishing and sustaining a healthier lifestyle for themselves and their families, people can pass new and/or continued traditions down to their children and future generations. My children love a tradition that I insist on keeping; that we have family dinners where we are all present at the table instead of eating while watching television or letting everyone just fend for themselves. In fact, if we are having dinner at someone else’s house and everyone is just grabbing a seat where they can, my daughter always tells me that she does not like that arrangement. She says she wants to eat “like a family”. It is an important aspect of all cultures to pass traditions on to future generations and continue their heritage. Food is a very important part of that heritage.

Andrew Flachs states that “[t]he way that parents feed their children reflects their ideology, their cultural heritage, and their economic means” (“Food for Thought” 1). Flachs discusses how more and more research is finding that Americans, mostly urban, low-income, and people of color “have become disconnected from their food” (1). People are replacing home-made, family meals with microwave meals and fast food (Flachs 1). With so many people having busy schedules these days, it is an easy trap to fall into. Many fast-food restaurants offer meals priced below five dollars and some offer dollar menu items. For years I was guilty of resorting to fast food a few days per week to feed my family until I realized how unhealthy a habit it is. I have been making the conscience effort to make better choices for about nine months now. I put

an end to all fast food and can definitely feel the difference in my body and see the difference in my weight.

Flachs explains that farmer's markets are being replaced by grocery store chains, leaving the reader with the impression that local fresh produce is less available because it is trucked in from who-knows-where (1). That is another reason why community gardens are important. Check out where the produce comes from in your local grocery store and you will find that a lot of it comes from out of state or from a different country. That is not what I consider 'fresh'.

Flachs explains that in addition to the health benefits of gardening, community gardens provide safe places for children, community events and social interaction for people from all walks of life. They also help to sustain a community's values (1). Like Rivria et al, Flachs discovered that people use the gardens for a variety of reasons, from supplementing their income to providing a healthier lifestyle (7). Flachs states "gardens can offer many of the same benefits as parks" (2). By transforming vacant lots into community spaces, property values within 1000 feet of a community garden have increased (Flachs 2). It seems as though community gardens are very positively influential in the lives of the residents of the community as well as the community itself.

In "Diversity and Connections in Community Gardens," Leigh Holland states that the World Commission on Environment and Development's report *Our Common Future* "stresses that urban food growing would allow greater access to food for the urban poor and support urban development" (290). This idea is explored farther in "Growing What You Eat" by Michelle P. Corrigan.

Corrigan describes food insecurity as a lack of access to enough nutritious food to be able to live a healthy lifestyle (1232). Corrigan states “The United States produces enough food for all residents but almost 15% are unable to access quality food” (1232). The United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that 34% of adults over the age of 20 years are obese and 32% of children ages 2-19 are obese (Corrigan 1234). Food insecurity and obesity often go hand-in-hand and usually occur among the same population, mostly in low-income neighborhoods (Corrigan 1234).

There tends to be more fast-food restaurants and few grocery stores in low-income neighborhoods (Corrigan 1234). People in these communities tend to purchase a lot of their food at fast-food restaurants or at corner stores, where there is little produce, if any (Corrigan 1234). The food in the corner stores is also more expensive than in grocery stores but it is more convenient and easily accessible for the residents (Corrigan 1234). Until the opening of three Bottom Dollar Foods stores in Youngstown, there was only one grocery store anywhere near the Idora Park neighborhood and a lot of the corner stores had closed. Corrigan also reports that the restaurants in low-income areas offer few healthy options, if any (1234). These factors contribute to the residents’ food insecurity and obesity (Corrigan 1234). Obesity leads to higher rates of death and more problems medically and psychologically (Corrigan 1234).

Community Gardening can provide access to fresh produce to people who do not have access to it now, primarily in low-income urban neighborhoods. Hopefully people will participate in the community garden so that they can enjoy a healthier diet, get more exercise and see improvements in their over-all health, as has been the case in all of the articles about community gardens I have read to date. It is my hope that the community garden participants

will get their children, friends, neighbors and other family members involved in the gardens and other community issues.

#### Methodology:

I will use interviews to collect data. I will interview my colleague, Ian, who is involved in the community garden and who just went through training at Y.N.D.C. to become a market gardener where he can grow food and sell it for his own profit. I will interview two staff members at Y.N.D.C. to find out more about community gardens and the possible benefits or negative affects they have on revitalizing Youngstown and the residents of the neighborhoods they are located in. I am curious to find out what effects community gardens have on all the residents and the businesses in these neighborhoods. I will ask questions about how the community gardens get started, how they are organized, how many participants there are, how the community gardens have impacted the lives of the participants and what some of their stories are. I will also ask questions such as (See Appendix).

It is my intention, when all of the data has been collected, be able to answer the question of how community gardens can revitalize a city. I am limited by the fact that the community gardening program started in Youngstown, Ohio in the spring of 2010, so the third growing season is just getting ready to start this May through the Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation (Y.N.D.C.). I am also limited by time. If I had more time to do my research, I would be able to do more interviews and send out surveys to both community garden participants and the residents of these neighborhoods that do not participate in the garden to find out their thoughts and opinions about what kind of impact the community gardens have had in their personal lives and on the community.

I decided to try to get some additional data, particularly from the perspective of residents of a neighborhood with a community garden, so I created a survey through a facebook.com link. I sent out a link for it in multiple places on facebook.com. I received no takers for it even after five days of reposting the link at least three times a day. I really thought that getting at least thirty takers would be easy online. One problem was that unless the taker either currently, or had previously, lived in a neighborhood with a community garden, they would not be able to take my survey. I would have liked to have the additional data, although it is a finding in itself and I do have people to interview.

I spoke with all three of the people that I wanted to interview for this study and since time was a factor for all involved, I decided to e-mail my questionnaire of 20 questions to each interviewee. I also had one other person who I sent a questionnaire to, through a third party. That person never responded. The other three interviewees all said that they would be happy to help me out with my research. I realize that not all of my questions pertain to all interviewees, but I expected the combined responses would yield enough data for my research for this project. I expected that all interviewees would answer the questions that pertained to them as thoroughly as possible, since that is what I requested. Two of my interviewees didn't respond for a few days. I called them to make sure that they received the e-mail and they both replied that they did but complained that the questionnaire was too lengthy and said that they were very busy and did not have time to respond. I was a little upset at first but then I realized that although this research is important to me, it is not necessarily important to my interviewees. I did get responses from them after my phone call but not the detailed answers that I was expecting. So I found the data I was looking for with more research using different sources combined with the responses from the interviews.

## Results and Discussion:

I discovered something that I never gave any thought to before. In “Three Groceries,” Karl Henkel reports that “[f]or years Youngstown has been a ‘food desert,’ a term given to struggling urban areas with few full-service grocers”. That fact is changing with the opening of three Bottom Dollar Foods stores in March 2012 (Henkel). Presley L. Gillespie, executive director for the Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation (Y.N.D.C.), was quoted by Henkel as saying, “[i]ts absolutely a huge victory for the city of Youngstown to be able to attract a national grocery-store chain”. Henkel describes how the Youngstown metro area was listed in as the third worst in the nation for the number of people suffering food hardships in a 2010 federal study because the city also has a high poverty rate.” Henkel states that “Y.N.D.C. shows most of the city’s 66,982 residents live more than a half-mile from a grocery and at least 18 percent don’t have access to a vehicle”.

I interviewed Liberty Merrill, who is the program coordinator for Y.N.D.C. and also in charge of vacant land use. This was done a couple of months ago with a group for a project in another class. I recently interviewed Merrill again for this study. Merrill explained how the Y.N.D.C. worked with several other groups to get Bottom Dollar Foods to open stores in Youngstown. (Merrill). Merrill explained that “they were impressed with the revitalization efforts going on in Youngstown, which include the community gardens”.

George Nelson confirms this fact in “Brown Promotes Aid” when he describes how more than 70 houses in the Idora neighborhood have been torn down, more than 30 have been fixed up, and more than 150 vacant lots have been created to be used for the community gardens and other beautification efforts. Nelson quoted Presley Gillespie, executive director of Y.N.D.C, as

saying “[t]he efforts of the neighborhood helped to attract its first full-service grocery store, Bottom Dollar Foods, in more than a decade”. It seems that the Idora neighborhood residents are starting to take their neighborhood back.

Merrill described how the Y.N.D.C. works in partnership with several other organizations, such as Goodness Grows in North Lima, to create and maintain programs that create ‘green spaces’ in previously vacant and abandoned lots (Merrill). Currently, there are five community gardens that the Y.N.D.C. owns in Youngstown with a total of one-hundred registered gardeners; four gardens in the Idora neighborhood and one in the Lincoln Park neighborhood (Merrill).

Any resident of a neighborhood with a community garden who wants to participate in the garden is welcome (Merrill). Participants are required to register for an allotment in the garden (Merrill). Each allotment is called a ‘bed’ and is usually about four feet wide and fifteen to twenty feet long (Merrill). The Y.N.D.C. provides the participants with everything they need to grow their own food, allows participants to choose what they want to grow, and provides training and education programs to ensure successful gardening and how to preserve what is harvested (Merrill). Participants are forbidden to use chemicals in the community gardens (Merrill). One of the programs created by Y.N.D.C., which include the community gardens, is Lots of Green (Merrill).

In “Youngstown Land Reuse” Lee Chilcote states that “[s]ince Lots of Green launched in the summer of 2010, the program has reclaimed more than 150 urban lots (about 17 acres of city land) (Chilcote). These lots were used to create “community gardens, side yard expansions, pocket parks, a storm water mitigation demonstration site, a block-long soil research site and a

2.5 acre urban farm” (Chilcote). It is nice to know that these lots are being used in such a positive way and that some of the programs are creating jobs and education opportunities. It is important to study how to successfully grow food in urban soil because it has so many different aspects to it than the soil used for growing food at a farm.

The Y.N.D.C. reports that students from Ohio State University established a garden on Mineral Springs Avenue to find the best methods to improve the quality of urban soil in the most cost-effective way. Urban soil lacks organic matter and nutrients, has heavy metal contamination, and has the additional problem of compaction. The soil research will help to ensure success at the community gardens and the Iron Roots Urban Farm in Youngstown, as well as provide useful information for other urban communities around the world.

In my interview with Curtis Moore, Farm Manager of Y.N.D.C.’s Iron Roots Urban Farm, I discovered that the property on Canfield Road, which sparked my interest in this research, is the Iron Roots Urban Farm. Moore explained that it will be used by the Market Gardener program participants to grow the produce that they will sell and also to teach anyone interested how to grow nutrient-rich food in a low-cost way. Moore states “Our current food system provides us with hyper-processed, high sodium, high fructose garbage that they pawn off on us as food.” The greenhouse will allow the Market Gardeners to grow food year-round and will be used to ‘start’ plants before they can be planted outdoors (Moore).

A colleague of mine, Ian Moody, was kind enough to allow me to interview him. Ian has participated in the community gardens since the first one started in 2010 (Moody). He went through the ten-week Market Gardeners training program this past summer (Moody). He is now able to grow and sell his own fresh produce in addition to improving his own diet (Moody).

Moody was one of twenty-five participants in the second Market Gardener's Training Program, which Scott Patsko reports "provides hands-on training so residents can develop their own market gardens or food-related business" ("Community Impact Awards"). Patsko explains that the goal of the program is to not only contribute to Youngstown's economy, but also make use of the city's neglected land, which includes than 22,000 vacant lots ("Community Impact Awards").

All three of my interviewees agree that community gardens make good use of vacant and abandoned land. They all report seeing the impact the community gardens have had on the residents and local businesses. Even residents that do not participate in the gardens are inspired to clean up their own properties. Businesses are cleaning up their properties as well. People are coming outside and socializing with each other, even people from opposite ends of the street. They are getting their children involved as well. The Raymond John Wean Foundation reports that the residents are working together to engage businesses to help as well and have had public meetings with area business owners and city officials to discuss the crime and blight plaguing the Glenwood Avenue area. Their efforts have already started to pay off. The Youngstown Police Department reports that burglaries and robberies in the Idora neighborhood have dropped in "Youngstown Neighborhood Development".

It helps that some of our politicians are helping as well. In "Brown Promotes Aid," George Nelson reports that "[h]elping efforts to restore areas such as the Idora Neighborhood, which has been hailed as a model for neighborhood revitalization efforts, is among the objectives of legislation promoted by U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio". Nelson reported that Brown used Youngtown's Idora Neighborhood as an example to discuss the Project Rebuild Act, which he said would help stabilize neighborhoods by rehabilitating vacant homes and businesses (Nelson).

Brown was quoted saying "In too many cases, an abandoned commercial building or abandoned home causes a decline in value of other homes in the neighborhood" (Nelson).

Furthermore, in "Leaders Discuss Plan," Mariam Hobbs stated that "Project Rebuild expands on the bipartisan Neighborhood Stabilization Plan, which helped rehab and demolish hundreds of homes in the region". Hobbs further reported that "Ohio could receive a minimum of \$20 million of the \$10 billion that would be available from the proposed federal program". Hobbs also quoted U.S. Senator Sherrod Brown as saying "A vacant lot is more than just an eyesore, it saps the life out of communities. The values of surrounding homes decline, city resources are drained, and crime gets a foothold. Our economy cannot recover until we rebuild our neighborhoods".

Conclusion:

Community gardens make great use of vacant land while providing a great source of accessible fresh produce and exercise for the participants. The community gardens inspire the participating residents, non-participating residents, and businesses to clean up their properties which helps strengthen the sense of community and restore community pride. The residents are socializing with each other once again, crime is decreasing and property values are increasing. The community gardens are a step in the right direction but it is going to take a lot more work and involve a lot more people to completely revitalize Youngstown and restore the city's economy. With all of the programs the Y.N.D.C. have to offer combined with the programs of other organizations, it seems entirely possible in due time. The future of Youngstown is looking bright...and green.

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## Appendix:

My interview questions included but were not limited to:

1. What changes, if any, have you seen in the participants? How have their interactions with each other changed?
2. What impact(s) have the community gardens had on the communities so far? Please answer in relation to the people and businesses of the communities.
3. Has there been more success in any/some of the gardens over the others? If so, why do you think that is?
4. What are the challenges and/or limitations the gardens face?
5. What role(s) does the community gardens program play in the revitalization of Youngstown?
6. How is the greenhouse in the Idora Park neighborhood used? What is the criteria for using the greenhouse? Is it the only garden with a greenhouse?
7. What do you foresee for Youngstown, in the future, as a result of the community gardens program?
8. What else do you think is necessary to revitalize Youngstown and make her a beautiful, thriving city once again?

