

HOMEGROWN

A FARM GROWS IN BROOKLYN

Two and a half acres of Red Hook concrete yield 2,000 pounds of produce.

BY SASKIA CORNES



Photographs: Phil Shipman

RED HOOK—Like many of the world’s most inspired ideas, it began on a cocktail napkin.

In 2001, frustrated with his job and preparing to quit, Michael Hurwitz sat down in a bar with Ian Marvy and decided that Red Hook, still reeling from the drug- and poverty-related violence of the 1990s, better known for truck traffic, waste transfer stations and massive housing projects, would be the perfect place for...a farm.

Three years later, seeds went into soil atop a three-acre asphalt ball field just off the BQE, surrounded by a 12-foot chain-link fence, littered with bottles, needles, and the occasional used condom. Today the thriving 2 ½-acre plot at the corner of Columbia and Beard Streets produces more than Thumbelina carrots and the best damn eat-em-like-apples Hakurei turnips out there. It’s also redrawing the boundaries of what “local food” means to New

Yorkers—employing local teens, engaging the community and providing some of the city’s freshest produce to one of its most underserved neighborhoods. And by looking to what Marvy calls a triple bottom line—the economic, social and environmental impact of the project on its place—the Red Hook Community Farm is redefining what sustainable food could mean for, well, everyone.

Seven years ago Marvy and Hurwitz were both social workers with no real experience in agriculture, working within the juvenile justice system and looking for a way to create change for youth outside the court system, an environment both men saw as “intensely negative.” When Marvy set a group of these teens to work at a neglected Red Hook community garden, the seeds of an idea were planted alongside collards, kale and the odd mustard green.

“In the beginning, it wasn’t about food deserts or organic or regional food systems,” remembered Hurwitz, who has since be-

come the director of the city's Greenmarket program. "It was just a tool to work with young people." But Hurwitz and Marvy quickly found that this kind of work had a very different effect from other kinds of mandatory service. Teens who began their time in the garden as a punishment—as a part of community service mandated for offenses like truancy, drug possession or minor assault—kept coming back to the garden long after they'd punched in the requisite number of hours.

"They planted seeds and they wanted to come back and see them grow, make them grow," said Hurwitz. "They kept hanging around. They kept coming back. They were seeing what they were capable of in a different way."

"So many of the issues we'd been talking about were coalescing around food and farming," added Marvy. "We saw an opportunity to reach far beyond where we'd been before, in a way that was supportive, proactive, empowering. We found what worked."

"As a whole there's a real paucity of opportunity to create, build and follow through in this society, especially for these kids," Marvy continued. "We found that the idea of planting a seed and seeing a real outcome really resonated with young people. There was a beauty, a rationality that really highlighted the irrationality of the world in which they lived and let them see how things

could go differently."

A year after the fateful cocktail napkin (which Hurwitz still has, somewhere), Hurwitz and Marvy founded a nonprofit, Added Value, with the dream of bringing youth employment and empowerment to the Red Hook community through something they were starting to call farm-based learning. Starting with 18 teens, including some graduates from their community service program, they worked two small community garden spots in Red Hook, schlepping all the way out to Far Rockaway to work another ½ acre, and setting up a weekly farm stand in Red Hook's Coffey Park. In a neighborhood with one of the highest unemployment rates in the city and one of the largest populations under age 18, the farm stand put money into the pockets of Red Hook youth and fresh produce into a community that at that time had a single grocery store serving approximately 10,000 people.

In May 2001, that grocery store closed. One month later, Added Value stepped in to fill the void, rescuing the neighborhood from the nutritional hell of a bodega-only diet by opening a full-blown farmers market, moving to a more central neighborhood location, selling their own produce and inviting five regional farmers to sell alongside them.

Shortly afterward, on a walk with one of the market's farmers,



Above: Neighborhood youth sell what they've grown; right: Ian Marvy, foreground, farms with 30 Red Hook teens; next page: Fresher than Fairway.

Marvy spotted the ball field. “I went home that night and cried,” Marvy confesses. “I thought, “This is our future.”

After almost 18 months of negotiation with the parks department, funders, and stakeholders in the neighborhood, Added Value moved onto the ball field and started the laborious, dirty and often joyful process of making viable tilth out of an expanse of cracked concrete. Instead of breaking ground, which was deemed both too costly and potentially too toxic, they dumped 50 cubic yards of rhino and elephant manure from the Bronx Zoo directly onto the tarmac for their first raised bed, testing the soil periodically for contaminants.

Since then Added Value has brought in 1,000 more cubic yards of city compost, expanding to 2½ acres of macadam into prime Red Hook farmland that produces hundreds of pounds of produce a year, everything from mesclun mix to ghost eggplant, with the help of four full-time staff members, a core group of about 15 teens a year and countless volunteers.

Perhaps more importantly, the farm is making fresh, organically oriented food accessible in what is still a food desert for most of the community. Despite the 2006 opening of a waterfront Fairway and the foodie meccas on a revived Van Brunt Street, three quarters of Red Hook residents live roughly \$6,000 *below* the poverty line and over 70 percent of residents live in public housing. Almost 80 percent of the farm’s sales come in the form of food

stamps, nutrition program coupons and WIC checks. The farm not only sells to award-winning restaurants like Fort Greene’s Ici and Red Hook’s Good Fork, it sends fresh seasonal produce (supplemented with local bounty like Hudson Valley-sourced dairy) home with people who might otherwise only have access to Cheetos and “fruit drinks.” And these veggies are being sold by the same neighborhood teens who grew them, who sweated for them, who know exactly where they came from, and what it took to get them under the market’s white tent.

This season, 30 Red Hook teens will be responsible for much of the farm’s operation. About half of them will be employed through the city’s Summer Youth Employment Program; the rest will earn an educational stipend, working on the farm from early spring to fall’s last harvest. Apart from income, Added Value offers its staff a curriculum in food systems and food justice, instruction in farm basics from seed to sale, leadership training, and a platform for student-led, project-based learning tied to food issues—a community food assessment map, a blog, a photo documentary of their local food system—whatever piques the teens’ collective curiosity.

But, says Added Value’s community education coordinator Caroline Loomis, “We’re not really trying to grow farmers or food justice activists. We want to grow young people who care about the world and see themselves as people who can make choices that have an impact, as people who can make change, who end



up seeing their bodies and their health differently than they did before. Often the issues we work with spark totally different areas of interest for the kids...and we're here to help them decide what's meaningful to them."

The farm also works with younger students. Added Value's core programming encompasses all three of Red Hook's public elementary schools, and at this point educational programs run by the farm in conjunction with school-based curricula have reached every child in Red Hook under the age of 10. Over 1,200 kids from other public schools came out to the farm for one-time educational visits last year.

"Teachers tell us the kids really hold onto their knowledge, even a year down the line," says Loomis. "Their observation skills, their problem solving, their ability to ask questions—these are all things that they learn here, because they're excited, they're engaged. And we see the kids coming back to the farm, bringing their parents or their grandparents to the market."

"A girl from one of the local school groups came up to me a few weeks [after her visit] with the seeds of a watermelon she'd eaten," Loomis remembers. "I showed her where she could plant it. She'd stop by every once in a while and kind of look after it. At the end of the summer she had a watermelon that was *two-and-a-half feet long*. She had to bring her family over to help her harvest it, and they took it home and shared it with their neighbors. To

me, this is empowerment. This eight-year-old girl understood how plants grow. She used her skills and her confidence. She felt the farm was her place, her own. She felt comfortable here, and she got to share that in a very real way with others."

There is something about seeing so much vitality in an otherwise pretty bleak corner of Brooklyn that moves people. This is perhaps the world's only farm directly across from an IKEA, and yet you can step in, sit in the sun, and look out over beds of technicolor rainbow chard and the elegant arches of garlic scapes. Speaking about the draw of this abundance, Marvy reflects, "There is wonder and mystery in the fact that one tomato seed can yield 30 to 40 pounds of tomatoes. That's more food than most people can really even picture. In the most wonderful, joyous way, it just does not make *any* sense. Somehow this is a mystery that resonates with John [Ameroso, an agronomist at the Cornell Cooperative Extension, one of the program's partners], with folks from the neighborhood, with the teens who were drug dealers—they all found something they could build a connection to or with."

The farm is currently in negotiations with the city for a long-term lease (the land is owned by the Parks Department), with plans for an expansion that would include an on-site classroom powered by solar or wind power, a barn, a community composting center, double the amount of growing space, and the possibility of rabbits, chickens, maybe even a goat or two. "When people walk on to the farm now, they feel a tremendous sense of potential," says Marvy. "They can see the baseball field, they can see the industrial infrastructure—none of those things have disappeared. But what they see now is fecundity. It doesn't present itself as a conundrum, as something confusing, but as an energizing and exciting thing. Somehow it all makes sense."

Somehow, Added Value has made a farm in Red Hook seem like the most natural, sensible thing in the world. 🍅

Visit the Red Hook Community Farm at Columbia and Beard Tuesday–Saturday during daylight hours. Volunteers of all ages and skill levels are welcome every Saturday from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Bring your compostables! You can also support the farm by shopping at its farmers markets (Wednesday at Wolcott and Dwight from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., and Saturday at the farm, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.), by asking for its vegetables at Ici and Good Fork (or ask your favorite chef to consider buying from the farm), or by making a donation at www.added-value.org.

