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Gabriel's Place: Growing vegetables, nourishing souls

When Avondale said it needed healthier food and a community center, a church listened

By Mark Curnutte



Troy Frasier, program director at the Gabriel's Market in Avondale, checks out his garden inside his greenhouse.

Fifteen-year-old Marcelous Riggs does not know 49-year-old Donna Cornett, and neither knows 82-year-old Milton Jasper.

Yet these Avondale residents are linked through a unique ministry and community building program called Gabriel's Place.

It combines multiple sustainable projects – garden plots, greenhouse (hoop house), fish hatchery for tilapia, market, industrial kitchen, youth cooking classes – in a single, pastoral location with a single focus: food.

Riggs, as a member of the Avondale Youth Council, worked last summer swinging a sledgehammer to break up an old concrete foundation where the Gabriel's Place greenhouse now stands. Cornett is nurturing a 4-by-8-foot plot filled with plants that started as seeds – growing cabbage, lettuce, beans and tomatoes – vegetables for which Jasper paid \$5.65 at the ministry's farmers' market and carried back across Reading Road to his apartment.

"This is in our community, which is why I came over," Jasper said.

At the site of the former St. Michael's and All Angels Church, which closed in 2008, Gabriel's Place grew out of the desire of the Episcopal Diocese of Southern Ohio to maintain a presence in the neighborhood.

After opening last fall, it has emerged as an urban oasis in its first spring: 150 individual households have shopped, most now regular customers, and 87 volunteers have contributed 340 hours of service to the market.

The mix of projects, like the melding of generations, is what makes Gabriel's Place different.

Kathy Schwab, in her travels and work, has seen many food-related programs to alleviate food deserts – the buzzword for the lack of groceries and fresh fruits and vegetables available in low-income neighborhoods.

"But I have never seen (a program) that combines all of these elements," said Schwab, executive director of Local Initiatives Support Corp. Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky, the regional office of the national nonprofit to help resident-led projects in low-income communities.

The nonprofit provided some engineering and architectural services for Gabriel's Place and pays the salary of its new program director, Troy Frasier, through its AmeriCorps program.

Gabriel's Place does have a model, though. The Milwaukee-based Growing Power program grows vegetables and raises fish, using a water-filtration process known as the aquaponic system, in abandoned factories in food deserts in Milwaukee and Chicago.

Episcopal bishop heard plea for food

Avondale's community council, youth council, the Cincinnati-Hamilton County Community Action Agency and the Center for Closing the Health Gap were involved with the Episcopal diocese at the site beginning in 2009.

Forty members of the youth council grew vegetables on adjacent land purchased by the diocese on Glenwood Avenue. By 2010, the number in the Do Right Teen Garden program had expanded to 80 members of the youth council.

Bishop Thomas Breidenthal said the diocese did not want to leave Avondale or abandon its urban mission. They listened to residents.

"Everyone told us they didn't have access to healthy food," said Breidenthal, whose leadership of 10 partner agencies and \$400,000 in diocese seed money for the project have helped it grow.

The industrial kitchen and community room in the parish house next to the church will be ready this summer. The first session of a junior chef program (ages 14-18), through Gabriel's Place partner the Midwest Culinary Institute at Cincinnati State Technical and Community College, is forming.

"I am excited to see how the young people will prepare the food being grown here and connect it to a healthier lifestyle," Breidenthal said.

A 2010 study by the Cincinnati Health Department showed that almost one in three kindergartners in Avondale measured overweight or obese based on their body mass index.

Nationally, the overweight/obesity rate in white children is about 16 percent.

Beehive of activity, even in its infancy

Outside, the hoop house – the greenhouse with a plastic roof wrapped over flexible piping, donated by the Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden – has produced its first crops, among them mustard greens. Frasier, 33, a former Peace Corps volunteer in the South Pacific island nation of Vanuatu, points to a fence line where raspberries and asparagus grow. Then he shows where a chicken coop (eggs) and beehive (honey) will go.

"We want to teach people how to raise their own food, and we want them to do it on their own land next summer," Frasier said.

"If we can't get a (grocery) to come in, we need to solve our food problem ourselves."

The neighborhood's last grocery, Aldi's, pulled out of the Avondale Town Center in November 2008.

Inside the former church sanctuary, the twice-weekly soup kitchen meal has wrapped up for the day. Audrey Scott started the meal service as a member of the former St. Michael and All Angels but couldn't stop just because the church closed.

A few shoppers pick through boxes of produce, most of which are bought from a wholesaler outside of Avondale and brought in.

In coming months, Avondale residents will be able to eat even more of what's grown at Gabriel's Place.

Cornett, who lives on Hearne Avenue and works in a Good Samaritan Hospital coffee shop, envisions tables packed with homegrown vegetables and says, "This is so good for the neighborhood. We can help each other."

Two Gabriel's Place volunteers, Elester Thomas and Brenda Jackson, already are helping and have packed plastic grocery bags with orders from shut-in residents of Avon View Apartments.

"Avondale is more than a troubled area," Jackson, 62, , said while loading grocery bags into her backseat.

"People do like living here. We do need a grocery and a pharmacy. But Gabriel's Place can do a lot of good for a lot of people in the meantime."

Additional Facts

Food desert

Avondale residents have not had a grocery in their neighborhood since Aldi's left the Avondale Town Center in November 2008.

Residents without cars either take a bus to the closest groceries, none closer than 1.75 miles, or shop at corner stores that offer little, if any, fresh produce.

In addition to the new Gabriel's Place ministry, and beyond efforts of politicians and nonprofits' efforts to improve the community's access to healthier foods, 20 members of the U.S. Bank Boys & Girls Club in Avondale planted a 16-by-16-foot garden at the club in April.

Members will make a meal from the vegetables at the club, and planters will take remaining produce home. They planted collard and mustard greens, Brussels sprouts, cauliflower and assorted lettuce. The Avondale Boys & Girls Club garden is the 36th nationally created by Teich Garden Systems of South Salem, N.Y., and is sponsored by Scripps Networks Interactive and its Food Network.

Plans are being made for the club's youths to sell the produce from their second harvest at Gabriel's Place market.
