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Mill Creek Farm: An experiment in urban farming, nutrition education, and solutions to the urban childhood obesity epidemic.

At a time when the American health care debate is raging, the old adage “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” once again is being tossed and bandied about by politicians. Some of the best preventative medicine has been proven to be a healthy and nutritious diet. But in places like inner cities, where childhood obesity and diabetes rates are high and prevention and good nutrition is most needed, fresh produce and unprocessed foods are uncommonly hard to come by. The lack of access to fresh, unprocessed, foods creates a vicious cycle of unhealthy eating and disease in urban areas that is passed from generation to generation. An idea is emerging in urban environments to counteract this cycle, and to bring both fresh, local produce to lower-income, inner city residents and to educate them on utilizing these foods and nutrition in general. Urban farming projects, like Mill Creek Farm in West Philadelphia are intertwining the fresh, local, sustainable food movement with concepts of social justice in the hopes of combating the complex problems surrounding the urban obesity epidemic. A partnership with another local organization teaching nutrition education could further strengthen Mill Creek’s mission and add to their success.

According to the University of Pennsylvania’s Netter Center for Community Partnerships, “The Center for Disease Control predicted that 33% of children born in the United States during 2005 would develop diabetes. Among African American children the projection is a staggering 50%.” The Netter Center also says that in West Philadelphia’s schools, childhood obesity rates are nearing an astounding 20% (1). To help combat this epidemic of childhood obesity and obesity-related diseases, the Netter Center runs the Agatston Urban Nutrition Initiative, or AUNI, which, “works to improve community nutrition and health- particularly obesity, poor nutrition, and related diseases such as diabetes,” (1). They focus their efforts on University-Assisted community schools through several activities, including School day nutrition education, increasing access to healthy foods, and school gardens (2). Another project in West Philadelphia that could be developed into a strong symbiotic education program is the Mill Creek Farm.

The Mill Creek Farm is a comprehensive partnership, located at 4901 Brown St in West Philadelphia, between several key stakeholders, including the Philadelphia Water and the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society. Decades ago houses were built on the site, on poor infill, which after a time began to become unstable due to an underground creek that runs below. When the houses began to sink and the foundations crack, they were abandoned and eventually knocked down. The lot sat empty, growing only weeds for 30 years (Geringer 1). A portion of the vacant property was converted into a bustling community garden. There were several sewer overflow incidents in the Mill Creek area after the property was abandoned, and the Philadelphia Water Authority leased the land from the Redevelopment Authority in the hopes of utilizing it for a storm water retention project (Geringer 1). Some of the community gardeners appealed to the water department that perhaps the lot could serve multiple needs in the community.

In 2005, the PHS and PWD awarded funding to begin an urban farm, and water retention project, on the still vacant portion of the property. According to their website the Mill Creek farm is committed to,

“Improving consumer access to nutritious foods and building food security; Developing a greater sense of community within the Mill Creek neighborhood; Educating local school groups and the greater Philadelphia community about urban agriculture, natural resource management and sustainable living; Managing stormwater run-off and utilizing rainwater as a resource for food production.”

In addition to the urban farm and community garden, there are strong educational and outreach components to the Mill Creek Farm. The farm gives tours to groups and hosts field trips, as well as a summer job training program. Sustainable building techniques are demonstrated through the composting toilet, cobb building, green roof, solar electric, and reused materials that make up the farm’s storage shed.



*Cobb Building and The Farm (millcreekurbanfarm.org)*

These green and sustainable features help keep the farm's costs low, so that they in turn can keep the prices of their produce low for their customers. The farm grows a range of over 50 crops, including okra, greens, root vegetables, tomatoes, corn, and eggplants (Annual Report 3). The current economic recession has only exacerbated the low-income Mill Creek neighborhood's lack of access to fresh, nutritious food (Geringer 1). So they have also begun to teach the Mill Creek neighbors how to grow their own food, in addition to selling the products of their labor at 3 local stands or co-ops from May to Thanksgiving, and soon a mobile food truck. All the produce Mill Creek Farm produces is irrigated by runoff that is collected and kept out of the city sewers (Annual Report 2).



*Mill Creek Produce Stand and A.L.T.O.E. Truck (millcreekurbanfarm.org)*

In addition to the public service it performs by retaining storm water, Mill Creek makes a wide array of fresh produce available to the low income population that surrounds them. The next step towards combating obesity and obesity-related diseases is educating low income populations on how to prepare fresh vegetables, many of which they may not be familiar with. Vegetables like collard greens and okra are very popular at the urban farm stands run by Mill Creek, because their preparation is familiar to lower income, predominantly African American, cooks. Researchers conducted a small study in the U.K. to determine if hands-on food preparation education of lower income populations can make a difference in adoption of healthier diets and increase utilization of healthy but less familiar fresh produce (Kennedy et al).

The Friends With Food (FWF) study looked at 4 study groups and one control group of low-income women in northern England. Two thirds of the participants were not working and lived in council (government) housing, while roughly one third worked and lived in privately owned housing. During the study, "Established nutritional facts were... mixed with practical activity (i.e. guided, 'hands-on' food preparation and cookery)." (Kennedy 91). Participants

learned techniques such as how to visualize amounts of fat in food, and how to utilize root vegetables and grains to extend meat dishes. At the end of the study half of the participants reported changing their “food-related practice,” (Kennedy 93). The hands-on “free” experimentation encouraged confidence in their preparation abilities and encouraged them to repeat what they had learned at home.

The biggest barriers to changing the participants’ nutrition habits were familial objections or social preconceptions. According to the study, “Social food norms and food habits... were clearly the most powerful influences on household consumption patterns. If the two were in conflict, family food preferences overruled the women’s concern for nutrition or health.” (94). Overall the researchers saw encouraging if modest changes in nutrition habits of the participants that they were able to attribute to the hands on nutritional education they received through FWF.

The Mill Creek Farm educational programs teach urban farming, gardening, and sustainable living, but they generally do not extend to nutrition and healthy cooking. The Netter Center’s AUNI program focuses on school lunchrooms and gardens, but utilizes “hands on” education, much like that demonstrated by the British FWF stuffy to be effective. A partnership between the AUNI educators and the urban farmers and educators at Mill Creek could be a strong collaboration to help lower income urban residents learn to utilize new foods and stretch their meals and food budgets in creative ways. Okra and collard greens are the most popular products that Mill Creek sells; but if residents are taught to cook with them, eggplants and other more exotic produce could become just as popular.

The Mill Creek project has been very successful in their goal to increase access to local and organic food. The farm says in their annual report that, “People are increasingly disconnected from the places and processes that produce their food, “ but they are working hard to reconnect people with the land that their food comes from, and reintroduce them to the idea of home-grown health. They believe that their philosophies and practices are exportable and transferable to other urban areas around the United States and the world. Collaboration with another local entity working to improve nutrition and teach healthier food preparation in low income neighborhoods could be a strong step towards making a lasting difference in the urban obesity epidemic.

Resources:

Agaston Urban Nutrition Initiative. <http://www.upenn.edu/ccp/programs/agatston-urban-nutrition-initiative.html>. 11/5/09.

Geringer, Dan. The little half-acre that could: Urban minifarms, like Mill Creek, are keeping many Philadelphians from going hungry. Philadelphia Daily News. 6.8.09

Kennedy, Lynne A., et all. 1998. Nutrition Education Program Based on EFNEP for Low-Income Women in the United Kingdom: “Friends With Food”. Journal of Nutrition Education. Vol. 30, No. 2, pp 89-99.

Mill Creek Farm Annual Report. 2007. A Little Taste of Everything. Philadelphia, PA.

“About Us.”. <http://www.millcreekurbanfarm.org/about.html>. 11/5/09