

HOPE GROWS IN YPSILANTI

By Alex Harrison

“We want people to see firsthand how much they can grow in a small urban space.”



Photos by: Amanda Edmonds



I thought I smelled something gamey.

Glancing behind me into the backseat of the little station wagon I spot the offender—a mammoth sack of shrimp and seaweed compost. The sack rests atop an even larger block of peat moss, which lies beside a hodgepodge of gardening tools and plastic pots. The car is packed to the gills, and I suddenly suspect that there will be dirt under my fingernails within the hour.

“Every minute counts, you know?” says Amanda Edmonds as she jumps behind the wheel and pulls out of the downtown lot. The day before, I had agreed to meet Edmonds, the executive director of Growing Hope, at her Ypsilanti office for an interview to profile this flourishing nonprofit organization. As we speak, it becomes apparent that her office isn’t just *in* Ypsilanti—Ypsilanti *is* her office.

It has been said that gardens are a form of autobiography. Life, death, growth, failures and successes play out in full color season after season, year after year. That sentiment couldn’t be truer for Edmonds. The nonprofit organization is her brainchild—the living and breathing manifestation of an upbringing steeped in environmentalism combined with a young adulthood filled with community service and the pursuit of social justice.

Armed with the mission to help people improve their lives and communities through gardening, Growing Hope serves the whole of Washtenaw County. It is also helping Ypsilanti pen inspiring new pages in its own autobiography.

The town saw more prosperous seasons in the early 20th century, when it played an important role in auto manufacturing. In the 1940s the famous B-24 bomber rolled off the assembly line at Ypsilanti’s Willow Run plant at a rate of one airplane every 55 minutes. Then the war was over; industry packed up and moved on to greener pastures,

and only recently has the town begun to emerge from decades of hard winter slumber.

Since 2000, Growing Hope’s community gardens have been appearing across the city, beginning with the Perry Learning Garden, where neighborhood youth could explore, work, learn and eat from a single garden. Eight years and 25 sites later, Growing Hope has partnered with other organizations and groups to establish gardens that serve a multitude of functions county-wide.

Neighborhood Gardens make plots available for rent or adoption for Ypsilanti locals to grow their own fruits and vegetables. Sharing Gardens grow food for those in need; in fact, all of the Neighborhood Gardens participate in Plant a Row for the Hungry, which helps to increase the community’s food security. Market Gardens establish the connection between gardening and entrepreneurialism. Finally, Healing Gardens serve as places of therapeutic respite for both mind and body.

As we make our way through town to Ypsilanti’s south side, Edmonds talks about the evolution of Growing Hope.

“It’s been interesting to see how we’ve evolved from garden organization to food system organization. So much of what we do now is couched in either food security or public health.”

We park in front of the organizations’ future permanent home, the Growing Hope Center—a modest house situated on 1.5 acres along Michigan Avenue. Although the official groundbreaking took place on May 1, 2008, long-term plans are in place to turn this property into a bastion of urban farming, education and inspiration.

A native South Carolinian, **Alex Harrison** enjoys schooling her neighbors in the virtues of shrimp and grits, while exploring the culinary abundance of Ann Arbor.

“We want people to see firsthand how much they can grow in a small urban space,” she says. “We’ll demonstrate how the supposedly short growing season here in Michigan can be extended using low-cost measures. And we will be doing a green renovation on this house, to show people how they can go green using existing property, on a budget.”

The Growing Hope Center will also offer healthy cooking classes using Center-grown food and educational programs for school field trips.

Much of Growing Hope’s shift in focus toward the local food system came about as a result of a survey conducted in 2005 by the Ypsilanti Health Coalition that revealed troubling information about the city’s food security: poor availability of affordable, fresh, healthy food to Ypsilanti’s predominantly low-income, ethnically diverse population.

At the time of the survey, there were no “full service grocers” within the city. Supermarkets in Ypsilanti Township were not easily accessible to lower-income individuals, and most stores within the city that stocked food focused their sales on snack foods, liquor and cigarettes.

The response from Growing Hope has been mobilization. In June 2006 the Downtown Ypsilanti Farmers’ Market opened. Growing Hope took the lead position managing the market and has support from partners like Washtenaw County Public Health, Michigan State University Extension and the Ypsilanti Food Co-op.

The market is adjacent to a government-subsidized senior high-rise,

one of the many nearby housing projects they strive to reach. It accepts credit cards, food stamps and state sponsored Project Fresh produce coupons, increasing affordable access for low-income families and seniors. Additionally, several local health clinics began offering vouchers for fresh fruits and vegetables from the Downtown Farmers’ Market.

Growing Hope also saw a need within the community to inspire and equip low-income individuals to grow and then cook healthy food for their families. Home-Grown Health classes teach children and their parents the value of a home-cooked family dinner. As an incentive to participants, the program provides free cooking equipment and gardening supplies upon class completion.

“It’s been amazing to see the dedication of families to this program,” says Edmonds. She adds that parents will show up for class after working two jobs, just because they value this time with their children.

While I’m still eager to hear more about every program Growing Hope is involved in, we’ve just arrived at Edmonds’ home, where a few hundred herb seedlings are in dire need of transplanting.

The donated seedlings are part of Growing Hope’s new social enterprise pilot called Hopeful Herbs. The sale of potted culinary herbs is part of the organization’s goal of generating its own revenue in addition to the donations and grants that are the lifeblood of most nonprofits.

We work quickly, creating a potting medium from a mix of peat, soil




and that lovely seaweed compost. Half an hour and 200 cilantro sprouts later, it's time to head back downtown. Amanda has a budget meeting to direct, though this won't be the typical buttoned-up business meeting you might expect.

"The kids from Roots and Shoots are presenting their budget for their first project of the year," she says, smiling. The eighth through 12th graders involved in Roots and Shoots explore the intersection of gardening and business, and every year they run a booth at the Downtown Ypsilanti Farmers' Market. Participants in this after-school program learn valuable lessons in planning, organization and business while having a great time.

Growing Hope sees itself primarily as a capacity-building organization. Its programs and classes are an entrance point—places to excite and educate families or other organizations which can then replicate what they have learned throughout the community.

Like an established plant, Growing Hope has roots that run deep, flourishing in native soil and destined to become a lasting part of the local landscape. ●

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