



Growing a Healthier Community Together

2017 Summer Report

A Message from Our Co-Coordinator

We know that nearly half of Crawford County 6th - 12th grade students self report feeling sad or depressed most days in the last year (PAYS). Nearly half. We see this trend state and nationwide and, as a community, it is our responsibility to take action using the resources and privileges we've been granted. Because it really does take a village.

In creating Grow Meadville, our goal was not to "save the children." Instead we pulled upon our experience as community organizers. Why? Because we believe youth are one of the most underutilized assets in our community. We oppress young adults daily by making decisions for them, forcing them into paths they don't choose, and failing to listen to their hopes and dreams and their amazing ability to imagine things beyond what already exists. At Grow Meadville, we want to unleash these students into their communities by working with them and supporting their ideas to make their communities better for them. A recent guidebook, *The Case for Healthy Places*, published by Project for Public Spaces, reported that 80 percent of the factors contributing to a person's health are not related to care or services at all, but about the physical, social, and economic environment in which a person lives. Activating our youth is another effective way of combating their melancholy in addition to the typical therapeutic solutions thought of among most professionals.

"...we want to unleash these students into their communities..."

To take these findings seriously is to rethink how we invest in our community and our young people. This doesn't mean making drastic changes to who we are as a community but, rather, being the best version of our community that we can be. We must focus on our numerous strengths and leverage those strengths to address challenges.

Grow Meadville was created to strengthen the connections of youth to each other and our community. To do this, we lean on Crawford County's rich agricultural history and use that asset to problem solve local health-based issues. The innovative Grow Meadville curriculum was designed collaboratively by a multi-generational group of educators and students. This intentional design demonstrates an investment in people and recognizes the experiences and knowledge of local experts (yes! youth are the experts in their experience) as a community asset to be highlighted and celebrated. We know that asking students to solve problems in their community ultimately strengthens their connection to their community while making them healthier and their community stronger.

"When people feel a sense of belonging to a community, when they feel connected to who and what is around them, they feel a greater responsibility to care for themselves."



In the two sessions of our program, we witnessed strangers come together for two weeks. Together, we learned about our community and we built skills in problem solving. But the work doesn't stop there. The skills, alone, will not combat our county's dreadful state of sadness. It is the relationships which do that when they bridge social capital across our community. When people feel a sense of belonging to a community, when they feel connected to who and what is around them, they feel a greater responsibility to care for themselves. This is the answer to the crises we care so deeply about: opioids, trauma, mental health, economic opportunity, joblessness, etc. All are directly correlated to the building of relationships and the vital empowerment of regular community members.

Our work as a community moving forward will never be easy and requires constant reevaluation. Grow Meadville is just one of the many examples of people using the strengths of our community to increase our collective health.

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Our Daily Schedule

Mission: Through cooking, growing food, and problem solving, we build lasting relationships with our community and each other.

Our youth were with us for 2 weeks from 9am to 2pm, week days only.



1. 5 hours of garden work

Youth worked in the garden spreading compost, planting seeds, harvesting crops, and weeding.



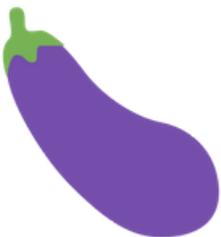
1 hour of cooking together

Youth harvested food from our garden and worked collaboratively to cook lunch



2 hours of place-making curriculum

Youth shared stories, met and interviewed people in our community including local business owners, farmers, and community members. All of these experiences helped us to get a sense of what assets, places, and problems exist in our community.



Community-based field trips

Youth toured our community on an "urban trek" where they visited local businesses and historical sites. Youth also visited a local farm, Fat Hawk Farms, to see how a small-scale farm operates and to help with farm tasks.

"I learned that I am adventurous. I learned that I am capable."

-Grower, 2017

Applying the Curriculum: Youth Build a Youth Center

"A group of Crawford County teens are working together with the Meadville Neighborhood Center to create a teen center in the basement of the Unitarian Universalist Church in downtown Meadville. We hope to create a safe place for teens to come hang out, enjoy music, crafts, and snacks, make friends and feel a sense of support from their peers."

-Katie Davis-Bonilla, 2017

Project
Proposal

Get
People
Involved!

Getting a
place!

Fundraising

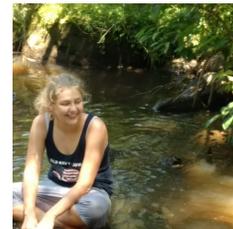
"I feel more confident
about myself and what I
can do."
-Grower, 2017

Setting up
the place

Creating a
board of
adults and
teens

Advertise
youth
center

Get youth
to come
and have a
great time!



The Staff of Grow Meadville

Our work to prepare for this summer began much earlier than you might expect. Starting in February of 2017, we met with a curriculum team of six people. That team consisted of two high school students who were Grow Meadville 2016 participants, two teachers, and two Allegheny College undergraduate students.

Working alongside our program coordinators, this group offered their own perspectives to help us design our curriculum. We feel that each individuals' "experience is amplified when combined with the experiences of others," as one team member reflected. Working with a multi-generational group not only made our curriculum stronger, it "made the group dynamic interesting and enjoyable." Our team genuinely enjoyed spending time with each other, most likely because of our willingness "to meet each other as we are and where we are." This is the exact environment we hoped to create for our students.

"We feel that each individuals' experience is amplified when combined with the experiences of others."

During our meetings throughout the spring, the curriculum team "discussed, brainstormed, and developed original curriculum about community identity and food access." One of our methods for including all voices was to start each session "with individual reflections that allowed everyone to make personal connections to what we would be discussing." This reflection tool helped everyone to see that their experiences were important and gave each of us something to contribute. We saw this idea reflected in our curriculum team evaluations, as one member said "this process reminded me that my own experience is a really valuable tool for creating a new project." This is one of the values we hold in Grow Meadville: that "everyone's voices, suggestions, confusions, and questions are valued." (The curriculum is available, for free, upon request.)

Our summer staff worked hard to create a similar environment of understanding, collaboration, and support among our youth when they finally arrived at the garden in June. Summer staff included two program coordinators, Lee Scandinaro and Taylor Hinton, two program facilitators, Delaney Heard and Merryn Spence, and an assistant crew leader, Katie Davis-Bonilla.

"My experience as a facilitator in this program has opened my mind and heart more than ever before to the power that our young people have in shaping and benefiting our communities. "

The staff worked hard each day to ensure the curriculum was delivered with compassion and our youth were engaging to the best of their ability. In staff reflections, we heard that, "as the weeks went on, many students developed noticeable increases in confidence and the capacity to express their needs, concerns, experiences, and ideas in the context of their peers and in the larger Meadville community." This development for students is crucial, as one of our goals is to empower youth to express their ideas and work with others to see them come to fruition. By learning to be articulate about their thoughts, youth are better able to engage in community work.

It was clear from our summer that youth sincerely want to be included in community work. As one staff member said, watching youth problem solve "helped to reaffirm my belief that young people can and should be engaged in community processes in every stage; they are more than equipped for dealing with difficult and intricate conversations." Too often we try to shield youth from tough conversation because we think they aren't able to contribute. However, at Grow Meadville our staff were "intentional about cultivating a space for creative thinking and community building through gardening." This gave youth the space to open up and wrestle with difficult ideas. In doing so, our staff got a unique insight into the lives of youth. Notably, we learned "how much students really value being connected to the land around them" or witnessed them "try a new vegetable and love it."

It was not only our youth who grew from this experience; our summer staff were "learning right along with the students, not just teaching them. " Throughout the summer, we were learning how to work with youth but, more importantly, we learned about the youth themselves: what they love about their community, what frustrates them, who they look up to, what kind of space they want to create and live. Their openness and honesty will help us spread the idea that youth are an asset, to our community, to each other, and to each of us.



Thank you for supporting young people in Crawford County!

Grow Meadville is extremely grateful for all of our generous supporters. We would like to acknowledge the sponsors who gave financial support and our friends who gave their time.

Our Friends

Crawford County Historical Society
Darren Lee Miller
Fat Hawk Farm
Karen Schreiber
Katie Davis-Bonilla
Dan Winston
Stephanie Polach
Merryn Spence
Autumn Vogel
Adel Gilman
Emily Yochim
Ben Haywood
Creative Crust
Tarot Bean Roasting
Kerstin Martin
Rosamond Learn
Stephanie
Pat

Our Sponsors

Allegheny College
Meadville Neighborhood Center
Community Wellness Initiative
Meadville Area Recreation
Complex
Crawford County Systems of Care
Safe Schools/Healthy Students
MARC Community Garden

