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Farm & Food Teen Training Project Impact & Evaluation Report 2010



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Evaluation by Rural Returns! *Helping Leaders, Groups, and Networks Achieve Better Results*
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PURPOSE
<p>The purpose of this report is to help the Rural Resources Farm & Food Teen Training Project staff and stakeholders better understand:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The impacts of the Farm & Food Teen Training Project on participants, their families, and the larger Greene County community.• The level of satisfaction with the program among current participants.• Ways to improve the program in the future.
WHAT WAS ACCOMPLISHED?
<p>In 2010, the Farm & Food Teen Training Project:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Engaged 32 teenagers in training related to growing and preparing healthy food.• Engaged 20 teenagers in training related to business planning and development.• Supported the creation of 6 new business ventures led by program participants.• Created numerous opportunities for program participants to provide food and nutrition education to the Greene County community.
HOW WELL WAS IT DONE?
<p>Program participants rated the overall Farm & Food Teen Training Project a 9.4 on a scale of 1 to 10, while program staff were rated a 10 on a scale of 1 to 10.</p>
WHAT CHANGED?
<p>Four major outcomes emerged from focus group conversations with program participants. These outcomes include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increased skills and knowledge related to content areas• Improved social skills and self-confidence• Healthier habits and decision-making• Increased contributions to family and community
WHAT COULD BE IMPROVED?
<p>Program participants identified the following areas for potential improvement of the Farm & Food Teen Training Project:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• More frequent meetings and work opportunities• Closer involvement with local schools• Increased fundraising and advertising efforts• Obtaining a larger bus to improve transportation for participants

Rural Resources Organizational Overview 2

Rural Resources is a non-profit organization dedicated to educating the community in the preservation and improvement of agricultural land, preserving rural heritage, and developing a locally sustainable system by producing and marketing agricultural products. In addition to the Farm & Food Teen Training Program, Rural Resources offers the following programs:

Mobile Farmers' Market – provides neighborhoods and communities around Greeneville and Greene County with fresh, locally-produced food.

Farm Day Camp – a summertime experience for young people ages 4 to 12. Each summer multiple week-long sessions are held for different age groups that include milking a cow, making butter, gardening, arts and crafts, exploring creek life, cooking, caring for chickens and goats, and having fun on the farm.



Four Seasons Grazing Club – provides opportunities for livestock producers to visit local and regional farms to learn about innovative practices involving rotational grazing, fencing systems, and watering systems. Frequent topics of discussion also include marketing and animal health.

Cooking & Gardening with Children – involves students and their teachers in gardening and cooking to experience where their food comes from while meeting curricular objectives as part of school and after school programs.

The Farm & Food Teen Training Project

The Farm & Food Teen Training Project expands Rural Resources' work with local teenagers. Groups of teens participate in a multi-year program involving growing vegetables and raising small livestock at the Rural Resources Farm, training with local chefs, and



learning business and leadership skills by starting a food or farm-related business. After appropriate training, teens and family members who participate have the opportunity to own livestock and/or participate in a micro-loan program. In 2010, the following four groups of teenagers participated in the program:

- Mini-Farming Ninjas (Year 1)
- American Farmers (Year 2)
- Mission Kitchen (Year 3)
- Soul Food Café (Year 4)

In 2010 the program was funded by Heifer International, the USDA Community Food Projects Program, the East Tennessee Foundation, and the Brooks Foundation.

This evaluation took place on October 23, 2010. Nineteen participants represented the four groups that are currently active in the Farm & Food Teen Training Project. Each group met separately with the interviewer and completed a short survey before participating in a semi-structured focus group conversation. Focus group conversations were taped, after the interviewer explained that the tapes would be kept confidential and secured verbal permission from all participants. Participants were given information and the opportunity to ask questions about the purpose, instructions, and context of the evaluation. Each focus group lasted approximately one hour.

This report was created from compiled survey data, field notes, and multiple reviews of the audio files. The interviewer synthesized the notes from each conversation, highlighting themes that developed across the groups and using the audio files to identify specific statements and examples provided by participants. All images contained in this report were taken on the day of the evaluation with permission from participants.

Core Evaluation Questions:

- How much was accomplished?
- How well was it done?
- What changed?
- What could be improved?

How Much Was Accomplished?

During the year 2010, the Farm & Food Teen Training Project achieved the following:

- 36 teenagers participated in the program. All 36 received training and experience related to growing and preparing food.
- Twenty teenagers also received business training.
- One group of nine participants is currently running a bake sale business, as well as growing produce to sell at the local farmers market.



- Five participants have started their own gardening or livestock related businesses.
- Participants have contributed to the larger community through cooking and catering opportunities such as meetings, church events, and even a wedding, and through four opportunities to pass on their gardening and cooking skills to younger children.

As part of the evaluation process, 19 teens completed a short survey about their experiences with the Farm & Food Training Program. They were asked to rate the overall program on a scale of one to ten, with one being the worst and 10 being the best. Responses ranged from 7 to 11, with an average of 9.4. Participants were also asked to rate the staff and trainers they have worked with through the program on the same scale. Responses ranged from 9 to 11, with an average of exactly 10.

Participants rated the program a 9.4 out of 10, and the program staff a 10 out of 10.

In addition, the survey provided each participant with a list of potential activities they might have done through the Farm & Food Training Program. Participants were asked to check yes, no, or I don't know for each activity. This section of the survey was designed to capture the effectiveness of the program in reaching its learning objectives for participants.

Survey Results

- **All 19 respondents** stated that they had **learned about growing and preparing their own food** and they had **made new friends**.
- **18 respondents** stated that they had **learned about working as a group**.
- **15 respondents** stated that they had **learned skills that would help them get a job someday** and **learned to make good decisions about what they do with their time**.
- **14 respondents** stated that they had **learned to make good decisions about what they eat**.
- **12 respondents** stated that they had **learned about raising and caring for livestock**, they had **taught other people things they had learned**, they had **learned about being a leader**, and they had **thought about what they might want to do after high school**.
- **10 respondents** stated that they had **learned about what it takes to run a business** and that they had **learned about managing money**. (Note: the 5 respondents who were in their first year of the program had not yet had the opportunity to participate in the business training aspect of the program.)



During the focus group conversations, participants were asked about what they felt they had gained or learned from participating in the Farm & Food Training Project, what had changed at home, and how the program had impacted the larger community. When their responses were synthesized, the following themes emerged:

- I. Increased skills and knowledge related to content areas
- II. Improved social skills and self-confidence
- III. Healthier habits and decision-making
- IV. Increased contributions to family and community

I. Increased Skills and Knowledge Related to Content Areas

Participants were very enthusiastic about describing the various recipes they had learned how to make through their cooking and catering experiences. One respondent described how it was helpful to learn how to make things from scratch, stating, “we don’t cook at home.” Others described how much fun it was to cook with friends, and praised the staff members who helped them with the cooking and catering events. “I like her [Chef Mary Goldman of Takoma Hospital] because she goes into a lot of detail when she teaches us. She doesn’t just tell us what to do, but tells us why, and how to do everything.”

Participants also listed a wide variety of farming and gardening skills they had gained through their participation in the program. They described learning about planting, caring for, and harvesting crops through workshops, conferences, and hands-on experience. All groups had gained experience taking care of livestock, from chickens to pigs to dairy cows to rabbits to worm boxes used for composting. One participant stated that the program “helps people know where their food came from and be more independent, so they can grow their own gardens.”

While one group had not yet participated in the business training aspect of the program, participants from the three groups who had, also spoke about the business-related skills and knowledge they had gained. Participants mentioned learning to manage money and make business plans, as well as acknowledging that running a business was harder than they thought it would be. One participant described the difficulties involved in making business-related decisions. “Robert (the Rural Resources Farm Manager) was working with us, and we’re so used to asking him what to do, and he asked us what to do! And we’re like, ‘I don’t know.’ But he was like, ‘what’s next, boss?’” Despite the challenges involved in “learning to be a boss,” however, participants showed evident pride in their businesses and the profits they had made.

“I think farming is still the most important thing, because if we didn’t have farms, we wouldn’t have food.”

II. Improved Social Skills and Self-Confidence

When asked about what they have gained or what has changed because of their participation in the Farm & Food Training Project, many participants mentioned social skills such as leadership skills, friendships, problem-solving skills, teamwork and group skills, and increased self-confidence. Participants spoke of experiences, such as moving pigs from one enclosure to another, in which they were pushed to work together as a group to solve a problem and complete a task. When they were unable to work together

“The strategies that [we use here] to help solve problems, you can use anywhere.”

smoothly, they said, program staff helped them sit down and “talk it out.” Several participants mentioned that the program has allowed them to overcome shyness and feel more comfortable with themselves and their peers. Others spoke about taking turns being in charge when the group would sell produce at the farmer’s market, so everyone had the experience of being a leader.

In addition, participants recognized that the social skills they were learning through the program were helpful in other areas of their lives. One participant mentioned that her relationship with her mother had improved since she joined the program, and another stated that she argues less frequently with her friends.

Several participants spoke of the program as a safe place where they could take a break from the stressors and worries of their lives. One participant described a challenging home life, and then stated that the program “helps us get away from our troubles that we’re having, and it gets us into a spot where we feel safe and comfortable, and we have people that we can kind of lean on.” Another stated, “It gives us a bit of hope that we don’t always have to be in that situation that we’re dealing with.” A third described how knowing that she would be going to the farm on Saturday helped her get through the week, stating, “But you keep thinking, only one more day, and then you can come here. And then no matter what you’re thinking of that’s negative, I don’t know how but it’s just gone.”



III. Healthier Habits and Decision-Making

Participants spoke of developing healthier habits and making healthier decisions in various aspects of their lives. Some stated that they are learning about nutrition and now eat more fruits and vegetables than they did before beginning the program. “And no soda!” one participant added. One group recognized the health benefits of eating organic, pesticide-free produce.

“Things from the store aren’t always the best thing for you – you can get better food if you grow it yourself!”

“I don’t watch TV anymore...I used to watch TV all the time!”

In addition, several groups discussed the importance of healthy decision-making abilities in other aspects of their lives. One participant stated, “Before I started coming here, I was going down the wrong path in life...and I realized that the choices I was making, I didn’t have to make. I’ve made a lot of close friends, and I’ve opened up. Instead of running the streets with people that I didn’t need to be with, making the wrong decisions, I come work and I stay away from them.”

IV. Increased Contributions to Family and Community

Another theme throughout the focus group conversations was the teens’ ability to contribute to their families and to the larger Greene County community. One participant stated that taking food that he had grown himself home to his family was his favorite part of the program. Others mentioned helping to cook at home, taking responsibility for home gardens, and relieving financial stress for parents by bringing home food and financial stipends. One participant even mentioned choosing chicken and goats over more conventional family pets, and taking responsibility for their care and upkeep.

Participants also recognized the value of their contributions to the wider community. “People that we cook for are very appreciative,” stated one participant, noting that meals were sometimes served to low-income or homeless populations through local churches. In addition, groups mentioned growing produce for the Mobile Market, providing public education at the farmers market, and working with children from YMCA and Boys and Girls Club programs as ways they have been able to contribute to the community through the Farm & Food Training Program.

In addition, the program itself was seen as a contribution to the community, since it gave “kids something better to do than get in trouble,” by providing structured activities that gave them a sense of purpose and a feeling that they were doing useful, meaningful work.

Focus group participants provided the following suggestions for improving the Farm & Food Training Project:

- Meet more frequently (once per week instead of once every two weeks)
- Become more involved in the local schools through field trips or working with school classes, greenhouses
- Engage in more advertising and fundraising (it was suggested that the teens could develop fundraisers for Rural Resources)
- Obtain a larger bus



“[Debbie] takes very good care of every single child. No one is ever isolated from the group. She makes a big impact just by herself.”

through warnings and paycheck deductions, but seemed to view these disciplinary measures as fair.

Program Staff

Comments in the focus group conversations regarding Rural Resources and program staff were overwhelmingly positive. Participants spoke highly of the Program Coordinator, Debbie Strickland, and described the other Rural Resources staff as awesome, amazing, funny, supportive, easygoing, understanding, and energetic. They also acknowledged that staff had high expectations for program participants, keeping them busy and asking them to “give 110%” during work activities. Several participants mentioned being disciplined for challenging behaviors

“She’s like a guidance counselor in a way. She’s really cool and she’s always there for you. Constantly.”

This evaluation was conducted by Katy Allen and Thomas Watson of Rural Returns!

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