

Rural Resources Farm and Food Teen Training Project Evaluation Report

Rural Resources

Sustaining Appalachia's Family Farms

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to:

- ◆ Shed light on the outcomes of Rural Resources Farm and Food Teen Training Project, and
- ◆ Provide insight on ways to improve the Project

This report contains 1) Introduction to the Project, 2) Overview of the evaluation method / approach, and 3) Evaluation summary that defines the outcomes of the Project and ways to improve.

Overview of Rural Resources

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. The following are services Rural Resources offers:

- ◆ **Mobile Farmers' Market**-provides neighborhoods and communities around Greeneville and Greene County with fresh locally produced food.
- ◆ **Farm and Food Teen Training Project**- groups of teens participate in a three year program involving growing vegetables and raising small livestock, training with 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.
- ◆ **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.
- ◆ **Greeneville Farmers' Market**-each Saturday morning May through October, the market offers the seasons best vegetables, fruits, and hand crafted baked goods from local producers.
- ◆ **Four Seasons Grazing Club**-provide 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.



Introduction

The Farm and Food Teen Training Project targets at-risk youth providing them with experiences and life skills in:

- ◆ Culinary arts and catering
- ◆ Food systems and agriculture
- ◆ Business and leadership

This is a three year program for the youth. In Years 1 and 2 there is a combination of culinary arts/catering and food systems/agriculture.

Participants learn how to:

- ◆ Grow vegetables
- ◆ Cook vegetables and meats
- ◆ Cater dinners at local churches and other community events
- ◆ Raise livestock living at Rural Resources Farm

Year 3 is devoted to a combination of business and leadership training in which participants choose a catering, livestock or horticulture business, then create and implement a business plan. Through these experiential learning opportunities, participants gain:

- ◆ Expertise in money management
- ◆ Business management skills
- ◆ Budgeting and saving
- ◆ Marketing skills

As teens participate in trainings and engage in work, they earn small stipends which are deposited into a savings account they open.



Alongside the primary training, two types of opportunities are provided to the teens and family members who have completed or are willing to join in additional training and group membership:

⇒ **Owning and raising livestock:** provides participants the opportunity to increase their own food security. Livestock participants get 10 additional training hours that go hand in hand with raising their animal and participate in a learning/support group to help increase overall success of the individual projects. Rural Resources farm is available to participants and families who need access to land.



⇒ **Micro-loan program:** provides a small loan to help start and support agriculture-food related businesses. This program requires a written business plan and participation in a learning/support group with other micro-loan recipients. Peer support meetings involve following a curriculum and 10 additional hours of training. The training sessions are conducted by a facilitator and require the active participation of each business owner.

Evaluation Purpose

The main purpose of this evaluation is to uncover the outcomes of the Farm and Food Teen Training Project—the effects or impacts that the Project has on youth, families, and communities served. As well as find where Rural Resources can improve the Project.

The evaluation will answer four major questions:

1. How much was accomplished?
2. How well was it done?
3. What changed as a result of this Project?
4. What can be improved?

Focus Group Questions

This study drew from questions designed by the National Research Center, Inc. on Community Food Project Evaluation (2006). The following are the core questions asked in each focus group

- ◆ What new things, if any, have you learned from participating in this project?
- ◆ What things do you like best about this program?
- ◆ What things do you like least about the program?
- ◆ This program is focused on farming, agriculture, cooking, and eventually starting your own business. Tell me about your experience and understanding of these areas before you joined? What about after participating in this program?
- ◆ How would you rate the overall quality of the program? (raise fingers, 1 being poor and 5 being excellent)

Data Collection/Analysis Procedures

For the use of this evaluation, a purposeful sample was taken, meaning that everyone involved in the Farm and Food Teen Training Project was interviewed. On March 10, 2009, three focus groups were conducted with the participants of the program. These semi-structured focus groups took place at Rural Resources with one facilitator who was also taking notes. A tape recorder was utilized to record the entire conversation of the focus groups. The interviews lasted approximately one hour and purpose, instructions, and context were explained before each focus group. Furthermore, the participants were explained that their responses are confidential and the facilitator would be the only one to have access to the audio recordings.

Following each focus group, the outside facilitator summarized the notes, highlighting themes that occurred and specific examples that pertained to the overarching questions that were asked. Although three separate groups were interviewed, the data was synthesized into core findings about the Farm and Food Teen Training Project and how the staff at Rural Resources could improve. After all data was synthesized, the facilitator reviewed the audio tapes further for particular quotes, stories, and examples to accompany the field notes.

Groups Interviewed

The three groups that participate in the program were interviewed in a focus group setting. Each group will be labeled Group 1, 2, and 3, respectively.

- ◆ Group 1 consists of nine youth ranging from the ages of 14 to 18, four of which are males and five are females (n=9). Additionally, the group has seven African Americans and two Caucasians. They have participated for a year in the program and were anticipated to participate a second year.
- ◆ Group 2 consists of nine youth ranging from the ages of 12 to 16, with one male and eight females (n=9). Of those participants, five African Americans, three Caucasians, and one identified herself as bi-racial. This group is in the second year of the program and focusing on the agriculture part of the program.
- ◆ Group 3 is in its first year of the program and the ten youth range from ages 12 to 17 (n=10). The group has one male, nine females, of which there are nine Caucasians and one Latina.

The total amount of participants for the focus groups is: 28 total participants; 6 males; 22 females; 12 African Americans; 12 Caucasians; 1 bi-racial; 1 Latina.

Evaluation Outcomes

The outcomes of the study are broken down into the following categories:

- ⇒ How much was accomplished,
- ⇒ How well was it done,
- ⇒ What changed, and
- ⇒ What can be improved.

How much was accomplished

Over the past year, Rural Resources has trained 28 youth; 6 males; 22 females; 12 African Americans; 12 Caucasians; 1 bi-racial; 1 Latina. All youth served were interviewed during this evaluation process.

How well was it done

At the end of each focus group, participants were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with the Project: 1 being poor and 5 being excellent. Averaging all the responses, **the program received a 4**. The lowest response was a 3 and the highest was a 5. Respondents who rated the program a 3 or 4 contributed the lower rating to negative interactions with others in the group and not the program itself. Some of those who gave the program a 5 provided comments like: “it gets us to learn things outside of school,” and “it’s something we want to do, we’re not forced to do it.” Additionally, a respondent from group one, who rated the program a 3, said that he “would want to go back and do the program again if I could” and all others in the group agreed.

“We learned how to work with people, work together, you know, team work”

What changed

Three major outcomes emerged from this evaluation:

- I. Increased Skills and knowledge
- II. Stronger Families
- III. Enhanced self-esteem and positive outlook for the future

Outcome I: Increased Skills and Knowledge

The four most common themes when asked what the participants learned were: (1) how to cook and cater, (2) how to get along with other people (team work), (3) about plants and agriculture, and (4) business skills

How to Cook and Cater

Concerning cooking and catering lessons one respondent said, “We learned how to cook meals, prepare meals, and learned how to serve them correctly.” Some Project attendees spoke of learning specific cooking and catering skills which included: cutting a whole chicken, how to handle a knife, set-up an assembly line for catering, how to cook specific items, kitchen cleanliness, knife safety, and table settings. Generally, most respondents stated that they had learned common skills related to cooking and catering .

“We learned how to cook meals, prepare meals, and learned how to serve them.”

How to Get Along with Others (Team Work)

Throughout the conversation the participants continued to mention how they learned to get along with other people. One participant said, “We learned how to work with people, work together, you know, team work,” and another said, “We learned how to get along and work with people you don’t like.” Participants in each focus group noted that they sometimes needed to work on a task or project with people they didn’t like, helping them learn how to work well with others.

About Plants and Agriculture

Groups two and three explained that they learned about plants and agriculture, but the first group did not due to the absence of a gardening/agricultural curriculum for their group. The third group went in-depth about some of the things they had learned, citing examples such as learning about soil, composting, and spacing and transplanting plants.

Business skills

Two respondents spoke about the business skills they learned which will “help us market products and budget money to start our own business.” Two respondents also discussed how the Project taught them how to make a presentation and increased their business and management skills, though they did not expand on their statements.

Outcome II. Stronger Families

The focus groups touched on the effects the project and skills have made within their family.

Increased Income

Each respondent mentioned how the stipend they received impacted their lives by allowing them the opportunity to do things such as: help their family with bills, create a savings account, provide assistance to their mother, start a bank account for college, help fund a foreign exchange trip, and things that they need such as minutes for cell phones, vegetables, and in one case a yearbook.

Bringing Skills Home

Some participants brought the knowledge and skills they learned back to their homes and families; participants mentioned cooking at home, helping to plant a family garden, and starting a compost pile.

Outcome III. Enhanced Self-Esteem & Positive Outlook for the Future

Personal Growth

Several participants commented on how they have changed and grown personally. Responses included learning how to bond, expressing feelings, and becoming more out-going and less shy.

Looking towards the future

According to respondents, the skills they have learned will help with future employment and college applications. Some of the skills that the respondents mentioned were “feeling more comfortable at job interviews,” and “learning how to speak professionally”. They also noted using Project staff as a reference on job applications, and the work experience gained. In group three, respondents drew connections with the skills they learned and how they will use them in the future. One respondent said, “I’m going to pass this down to my kids so they can feed themselves and help the environment.” Everyone in that group agreed and another added on by saying, “it contributes to the community.”

“Learning how to speak professionally.”

“I’m going to pass this down to my kids so they can feed themselves and help the environment.”

Ways to Improve the Project

Through the focus group discussions, the youth commented on (a) Best aspects of the program, (b) Least favorite parts of the program, (c) Ideas for enhancing the project, and (d) the Micro Loan Program all of which can improve the work Rural Resources is doing.

Best Aspects of the Program

The participants in the focus groups made a variety of comments on the best part of the programs and shared insight into what they enjoyed. The two aspects of the program that the participants liked best were *making money* and *learning new things*.

- ◆ Each group enjoyed money they made for participating in the meetings. Group one, who is not involved in the program anymore much of which has to do with money, will be described in-depth later.
- ◆ The majority of participants described learning new things as the best part of the program, which included learning how to cook, cater, plant, and work together. The respondents also commented that they liked hanging out with friends, the retreat, parties they used to throw, cooking and catering for the community, and planting. The participants from group one were particularly reflective and nostalgic about the parties they used to throw and retreat they attended.



Least Favorite Parts of the Program

When the participants were asked what they liked least about the program, the problems which arose from the discussion were logistical/programmatic issues, compensation for the program activities, and difficulties with working with others.

- ◆ The logistical and programmatic problems discussed by respondents were: “not knowing exactly when we were getting a paycheck,” buses not being on time: “saying that it would come at one time and it doesn’t,” cleaning-up, cooking food with new stipulations (i.e. for diabetics), bathroom accommodations (did not like having only an outhouse or composting toilet), and not being able to use cell phones.
- ◆ The first group did not appreciate the smaller monetary compensation for the micro loan portion of the program.
- ◆ Majority of participants commented on the negative aspects and difficulties of working with challenging people in the group. One respondent said sometimes there was “a lot of drama.” “People get mad at little things and don’t do what they’re supposed to do.”

**Ideas for Enhancing the Project**

Towards the end of the focus group interviews, participants were asked ways to make the program better. Below, in no particular order, because there were no themes, is a list of suggestions respondents said:

- ◆ Longer programs
- ◆ More staff
- ◆ More youth involvement with catering and parties
- ◆ More out of state trips
- ◆ Make us work, but have more fun doing it
- ◆ Cook more soul food

- ◆ Learn how to hunt and gather
- ◆ Have consequences for actions; suspensions or other disciplines for hurting another.
- ◆ Integrate computers and technology
- ◆ Should have homework and write up what we’ve learned
- ◆ Ask more people to join
- ◆ Work with more animals
- ◆ Allow cell phone use

“[I] would want to go back and do the program again if I could”

Micro Loan Program

Because those in group one did not participate in the micro loan program, Rural Resources wanted to know why.

Those in group one were asked why they did not continue on with the micro loan program and two themes emerged: money and not feeling ready to have a business.

- ◆ Money: This group felt that this portion of the program did not allot enough money. One participant said, “If you’re going to take up more time they need to give us more money.”
- ◆ Not ready to have a business: Other participants mentioned that the pressure and increased amount of work from school did not allow them to create a business. A respondent mentioned that, “school work and a business are too much, my grades would drop and my business would fail.” Also, another respondent said he did not do a business is “because we’re just kids.”

Therefore, many felt that they were not ready to follow through with the business portion of the program, but would have continued “if we could do what we were doing.”

Conclusion

The information presented in this Evaluation Report suggests that the Rural Resources Farm and Food Teen Training Project is achieving important outcomes at many of the levels. The clearest and strongest outcomes are at the individual participant level – particularly in capacities related to learning new skills and retaining the knowledge being taught in the program. Other important outcomes include 1) youth using the skills gained and money earned to help support their family; and, 2) that youth feel more positive about themselves and their future career opportunities.

Participants also suggested ways to improve the Project including such things as having more de-

financed polices and guidelines regarding pay checks and bus schedules, additional training or prep time for new/unusual menu items, and upgrading Rural Resources facilities. In addition, it seems that further study and planning is required to ensure future success of the micro-loans program. This evaluation serves as a vital resource for the Rural Resources Farm to continue providing effective, outcome producing programs to teens and their families through the Food Teen Training Project by illuminating it's strengths and areas for improvement.

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