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connecting farms, food, & families

Farm & Food Teen Training Project
Impact & Evaluation Report 2012



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Evaluation by Rural Support Partners
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Executive Summary

PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to help the Rural Resources Farm & Food Teen Training Project staff and stakeholders better understand:

- 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?

In 2012, the Farm & Food Teen Training Project:

- Engaged 41 teenagers in training related to growing and preparing healthy food.
- Engaged 19 teenagers in training related to business planning and development.
- Supported the creation of 3 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?

Program participants and parents rated the overall Farm & Food Teen Training Project a 9.31 on a scale of 1 to 10, while program staff were also rated a 9.31 on a scale of 1 to 10.

WHAT CHANGED?

Four major outcomes emerged from focus group conversations with program participants. These outcomes include:

- Increased skills and knowledge related to content areas
- Increased leaderships skills and responsibility
- Improved social skills
- Awareness of career options and necessary skills

WHAT COULD BE IMPROVED?

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)
- Continue to meet through the winter
- Engage in more advertising and fundraising to sustain the program

Rural Resources Organizational Overview

Rural Resources is a non-profit organization whose mission is to connect farms, food, and families. They do this by facilitating learning experiences in order to preserve farmland, natural resources, and sustainable agriculture practices and build a vibrant local food economy. In addition to the Farm & Food Teen Training Program, Rural Resources offers the following programs:



Online/Mobile Farmers' Market and CSA– provides neighborhoods and communities around Greeneville and Greene County with fresh, locally grown food. The Community Support Agriculture Project is a way for members of the community to invest in local farms and received produce from the farm in exchange. Customers

pay a fee and receive a weekly share of the farm's harvest. Every Thursday, the Mobile Market delivers food from the farm directly to homes, businesses and Takoma Hospital. Orders can be placed online or by phone.

Farm Day Camp – is 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 cows, 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 – is an educational and networking group that provides opportunities for livestock producers to visit local and regional farms to learn about innovative practices involving rotational grazing, fencing, and watering systems. Frequent topics of discussion also include marketing, growing new foods and animal health.

The Farm & Food Teen Training Project

The Farm & Food Teen Training Project expands Rural Resources' work to 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. Once teens receive the appropriate training, they have the opportunity to participate in an internship program. Then Rural Resources will support them in developing a food related business of their choosing. In 2012, the following four groups of teenagers participated in the program:

- “THE” Group (Year 1)
- Lovers of Land - L.O.L. (Year 2)
- Mini-Farming Ninjas (Year 3)
- American Farmers (Year 4)



Evaluation Framework & Methods

This evaluation took place on October 28, 2012. Sixteen participants represented the four groups that are currently active in the Farm & Food Teen Training Project. Two parents were also interviewed about their teens' involvement in the program. Students who are in their third and fourth year in the program met with the interviewer first, followed by students in their first and second years. Each group 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 thirty minutes.

Core Evaluation Questions:

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

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 are used with permission from the participants.

How Much Was Accomplished?

During the year 2012, the Farm & Food Teen Training Project achieved the following:

- 41 teenagers in all participated in the program. All received training and experience related to growing and preparing food.
- 19 teenagers also received business training.
- 8 participants from the Mini Farming Ninjas group are currently running a casserole business.
- 6 participants from the American Farmers group have started their own market garden and are raising rabbits for fur and meat.
- Participants have contributed to the larger community by:
 - Growing produce to sell at the local farmers market
 - Helping recovery efforts after a tornado
 - Teaching other teenagers how to cook through on site demonstrations and at the Farmer's Market

How Well Was It Done?

As part of the evaluation process, 16 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 10, with an average of 9.18. Participants were then asked to rate the staff and trainers they have worked with in

the program on the same scale. Responses ranged from 5 to 10, also with an average of 9.18. Two parents participated in a separate focus group and rated both the program and the staff a 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 16 respondents stated that they had learned about growing and preparing their own food and had made new friends.
- 15 respondents stated that they had learned about working as a group and had learned about raising and caring for livestock.
- 14 respondents learned to make good decisions about what they do with their time and about what they eat.
- 12 respondents stated that they had learned skills that would help them get a job someday and learned about being a leader.
- 11 respondents reported they had taught other people things they had learned in the program.
- 10 stated they had thought about what they might want to do after high school.
- 9 respondents stated that they had learned about what it takes to run a business.
- 8 respondents stated that they had learned about managing money.

Much of the difference in these responses can be attributed to the structure of the program: students are involved in more activities as they progress through the each year. In general, first and second year students reported involvement in 7 out of 12 activities, third year students reported involvement in 11 out of 12, and fourth year students had been involved in 12 out of 12.

What Changed?

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. Increased leaderships skills and responsibility
- III. Improved social skills
- IV. Awareness of career options and the necessary skills

I. Increased Skills and Knowledge Related to Content Areas

One part of the mission of Rural Resources is to facilitate learning experiences that connect farms, food, and families. The participants in the Farm and Food Teen Training program were very eager

to share about the knowledge and skills they have learned on the farm. They told about their experiences helping milk the cow, raise the turkeys, and make mushroom logs. Off the farm, students have been hard at work making casseroles, performing demonstrations of skills at the Farmer's Market, and helping raise funds for the program.

“You have to support the local farmers and it's much healthier to cook local foods instead of something out of the store that's injected with chemicals”

Several students talked about their new love of cooking. “I cook all the time. I'll help anyone cook or cook by myself, just all the time,” one person said. Students reported an increase in their enjoyment of cooking and the frequency in which they cook at home. The group revealed a desire to cook primarily with local foods in order to support local farmers because they know that local farms support the community. Participants also said that they want to cook with healthy foods “instead of something out of the store

that's injected with chemicals.” Because of the training program, students understand the process of farming, how it affects their health and how they can take action to help their families and communities become healthier. In addition to feeling more connected to the farm, participants commented that they feel more empowered now that they can use fresh foods to cook for and take care of themselves at home.

II. Increased Leadership Skills and Responsibility

Whereas teenagers are most often receiving instructions, the Farm and Food Teen Training Program offers them an opportunity to practice leadership skills. Students spoke with pride about their management positions and increased responsibilities within the program. “We have a manager of the day. So if there's someone who is slacking, they'll take money from them and give it to one of the people who are working,” said one participant. The program meetings are structured so that everyone has a different role in the group and the students recognize that teamwork is vital to achieving their goals. In order to be successful, students must take responsibility for their work and hold each other accountable. In addition to leadership skills, the students are also building communication and conflict resolution skills.

Participants in their third and fourth year of the program have started their own farm-based businesses. Members of these groups recognize that they are also responsible to their customers for the products they sell. Students have learned how to advertise their business, take orders, fill the requests and be held accountable for the product to the customer.

III. Improved Social Skills

The Farm and Food Teen Training Program is also a place to increase social skills. For example, several students noticed a decrease in shyness in themselves and their peers. One teen said that when they first started the program they were really shy but have become more talkative as the program has continued. Other participants discerned that the time they spend in the program directly influences the amount of time they spend on the computer or watching TV. “It gets us out of the house ... most teens are lazy,” one participant stated. Interestingly, by rule there is no cell phone

usage during program meetings. At a time when the primary form of communication for young people is through texting, teenagers here must learn and develop face-to-face communication skills in order to move their work forward successfully. Over the four years working together, the students grow together and become very close. “Each group isn’t just a group, it’s like a family,” they said.

“Each group isn’t just a group, it’s like a family”

IV. Awareness of Career Options and Necessary Skills

Residents of Greene County are less likely to have graduated high school or have earned a Bachelor’s degree than the average American. The Teen Training Program, however, helps teens build the skills they need to be successful in school and encourages students to think about their future after high school. Participants are thinking about the effects the program could have on their job prospects once they graduate. Students identified working as a team, receiving instructions and being in charge of the group as skills that will be valuable in the workforce. One student specifically pointed out these will be helpful “... whenever you get a job and there’s people you don’t like you know how to get along with them.”

Impact on Families and the Community

Impacts on the Community:

- Providing food to victims and helpers after a tornado
- Selling casseroles made with healthy, locally grown ingredients
- Demonstrating how to cook simple healthy snacks to other teenagers

Students in the program repeatedly commented on the importance of their connections to the community. One particularly proud moment for a student was recounting that two groups from the program helped provide food for those working to clean up the town after a tornado hit the area. The teens cooked meals and snacks and delivered food and water to victims and helpers.

Students spoke with excitement about their business in which they sell casseroles to customers. “We hand make (the casseroles), we cut up all the vegetables, and shred the meat... we rarely buy anything unless it’s out of season.” Members of the community are able to call Ms. Debbie or contact the group on Facebook to place their orders. Recently, one of the parents was able to get an article in the local paper which increased the visibility of the business and increased their sales. “We got tons of customers”

after that article, they said. The business has provided families with food that is healthy and locally-produced, and given the students experience creating and selling products. Participants were also able to teach other teenagers how to cook basic healthy snacks at a group home in town and attend the local Farmer’s Market, where they sell fresh vegetables.



The students' enthusiasm for the program was reflected by their parents, who offered rave reviews of the program, staff, and ways their families have been affected. Parents appreciate that their teenagers are getting a different perspective on life and are able to work toward the same goals with others in a non-threatening environment. They also report that their students "have learned so many different ways of gardening – they're so excited about what they've learned and they're telling everyone else!" Parents identified that not only is this a great program, but it is desperately needed in this area to teach teenagers how to cook, grow their own food and eat healthy.

Program Staff

Participants were eager to share words of praise about the program staff. "Ms. Debbie is extraordinary!" one student exclaimed. Several students reported that participating in the program feels like having another family, saying that the staff is amazing, great, cool and awesome. Parents added to the acclaim, saying "Debbie is top of the line. She makes every effort to make sure these kids feel like they are number one." One student shared a story about family having trouble getting food for Christmas dinner. Ms. Debbie and Chef Mary brought groceries to the family so that they could celebrate Christmas with a big meal as a family.

The teens currently in the gardening program have connected with the new farmer, Paul, who recently introduced turkeys to the farm and students. "Paul is awesome, he's all about farming. And I like the baby turkeys," one student reported. Several participants and parents commented on Paul's vast knowledge of organic farming and how helpful it has been to learn from him this year.

What Could Be Improved?

In the focus groups, it was clear that both students and parents desire more time to spend on the farm and more opportunities for the students to learn and share their knowledge. The passion for the program was palpable in the interviews. The students and parents listed not only the ways that they are currently attempting to raise money but also their utmost willingness to do more to help. Specifically, participants provided the following suggestions for improving the Farm & Food Training Project:

- Meet more frequently (once per week instead of once every two weeks)
- Meet through the winter, if possible. The students and parents were distressed about the possibility that, due to funding shortages, the program anticipates it will not meet during the winter as it has in the past.
- Engage in more advertising and fundraising to sustain the program. Students and parents expressed interest in helping to increase fundraising opportunities in order to keep the program going.

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