

Museum on Main Street, Smithsonian Institution
Stories: Yes | Student Digital Storytelling Project
DeKalb County Community Garden, Illinois

Speaker 1 (Child): Our love for food is something contagious, and DeKalb County Community Gardens is a unique organization that relies on volunteers and members of the community to spread the love of food through teaching and feeding both mind and body. Their mission is to empower DeKalb County residents to choose healthy and sustainable foods through community education. Their goal is ultimately ending hunger, empowering individuals, and growing community to work together.

Dan Kenney: [0:33] Well, we have many different gardens. But the very first gardens were built in March of 2012 at some schools in the DeKalb School District as well as Conexion Comunidad and some other community locations. [0:57] Well, the idea of the gardens started back in 2006. In a way, I was working as an in-school suspension teacher at a middle school in Dekalb and I was working with students who had very little experience with knowing where their food came from. And so we got a grant and we started to put in a garden in 2006 at Clinton Rosette Middle School in DeKalb.

Dan Kenney: [1:32] These gardens are important to me because I used to lay awake and think about, "How could we, in this county, where we have the best soil in the world, why do we have people who are hungry?" And so that's why we started the community gardens and that's why I feel that they're important. [1:58] Well right now, farming food that we eat, that travels about 1,500 miles before it gets to our plate. And that's not gonna be very sustainable going into the future. And so one of the things why teaching more people how to grow their own food, by working on what we call a local food security system for our county, we are preparing for the future when the cost of transporting food might not be feasible anymore. And so that's one way it's helping for the future.

Dan Kenney: [2:32] The other way it's helping for the future is that we are doing a lot of experimentation on how to grow food year-round in a cold climate. So one of the ways we're looking at the future for growing food is using greenhouses similar to this. These plants are growing here since February. And in February it was very cold. And so all through the month of March we were able to grow these plants inside. There's also many different ways we're experimenting with how to grow food inside all year round using hydroponics and aquaponics and other means like that.

Dan Kenney: [3:18] Since we've started, we've produced over 175,000 pounds of food that has been distributed to people in need in our county. Produce from the gardens are used by volunteers who work in the gardens, or they are taken to food pantries to be given to food insecure people in the county. [3:46] Right now, we have three full-time employees and then during the season, we have several other part-time employees. Where we're video taping this right now, we are at the Walnut Grove Vocational Farm, which is a program of DeKalb County

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Community Gardens. At this location, we work with individuals who have disabilities and we train them in horticulture and agriculture. So all of the plants you see here in the greenhouse were planted from seed in our germination room and then raised here to be sold to the public. Dan Kenney: [4:23] And the people that are doing that work are high-school aged and older individuals with disabilities. We've established 56 different community gardens around the county. All the elementary schools in Sycamore, the elementary schools in DeKalb, as well as senior citizens' centers, low-income housing locations, community sites, many different locations. We get our funding from many different locations. Mostly we get our funding from grants, donations, and fundraisers.

Dan Kenney: [5:16] Well, we had a school board member approach us about putting gardens at the schools in DeKalb and asked us if we would do that. And then, after we did that the very first year, the second year, the superintendent of schools for the Sycamore School District, Mrs. Countryman, came to us and asked if we would consider putting gardens in at the elementary schools in Sycamore.