

Growing a Community

How a student service gardening project at Brittany Woods Middle School blossomed into a food sustainability network for students throughout U. City

It all started with the seed

of an idea planted in the middle school in the summer of 2019 by then eighth-grader Alara Stewart.

Stewart had a growing awareness of a nearby Syrian immigrant community trying to make a new life in St. Louis. Then, she and three other Brittany Woods students were selected to attend a free and prestigious WE Schools leadership camp in Tucson, Arizona, to learn about designing and implementing impactful school service projects for teachers and peers. When she returned from the camp, Alara proposed planting a garden in the Brittany Woods Middle School outdoor courtyard where students could grow fresh produce for Syrian and other immigrant families living in or near University City.

Anybody who has ever started and tended to a garden knows that it takes a lot of time, sweat and resources to go from an idea to yielding an actual tomato or potato. But that was of little concern to Anne Cummings, a teacher at Brittany Woods.

“Students need to think big, make a plan and adjust when they have to. It’s all part of learning problem-solving and leadership,” she said.

“Middle schoolers are often natural leaders, and I see my role as someone with a little more life experience who works alongside them,” Cummings said. “There’s no textbook that can effectively teach students fundraising, marketing, grant writing, volunteer coordination, spatial design and gardening concepts. All of these skills are transferable, and the students learned them by working with experts, learning from mistakes, and trusting their own judgement.” And, she noted, “Every moment in the garden is an opportunity for critical thinking and problem-solving. Those are the foundations of science.”

The Giving Garden

It wasn’t long before Stewart had the interest of a core group of about 15 middle school students – and commitments from a variety of individuals and organizations to help and fund materials, like rakes and shovels, a garden shed, lumber for plant beds, fertilizer, grow lights and more. Partners included UCity in Bloom, University City Education

Foundation, Gateway Greening, St. Louis Community Foundation, The Richmond Heights Garden Club and private citizens. According to Cummings, “Each time a need arises, someone generous is there to support our growth.”

As donations increased, and raw earth was broken and tilled, the urge to work in the soil grew among the Brittany Woods community. Many students found they had a green thumb, and others appreciated a pleasant place to go outside for lunch or free periods. Picnic tables and a tree-stump conversation ring were added to build community. Then came orchard plants like mulberries and raspberries.

“We had sixth-graders, seventh-graders and eighth-graders – basically the whole school – bringing in dirt, planting seeds, weeding,” said Candace Weeden, now a sophomore. “It brought us together because everybody got to do something.”

Even before the garden started yielding flowers or food, some students discovered the garden could be a sanctuary. Cummings said students having a hard day know they can set their work aside so they can de-stress, center and mentally move forward with the rest of their day.

And the garden gave back even more than that, Stewart said.

“It helped Brittany Woods because it helped students become leaders.”

The students named it The Giving Garden.

A Community In Bloom

Amid a global pandemic, The Giving Garden still thrives.



Last spring, when students were not able to attend classes in the buildings, student volunteers planted nearly a hundred sweet potato slips. The fall climate was so mild and kind to the garden that it gave back dozens and dozens of sweet potatoes, and they celebrated their success with the first annual Brittany Woods Middle School Sweet Potato Harvest, which featured STEM and language arts related contests.

“The summer and fall harvests made the massive spring effort worthwhile. It was hard to accomplish the work of 60 kids with a few socially distanced people,” said Cummings. “Despite the pandemic, we had tomatoes, peppers, herbs, cucumbers and beans to share with the community. The joy of being outside with students just grows exponentially. Watching them learn how to garden and getting them comfortable with it is a beautiful thing.”

Even in the midst of brutal February cold snap, The Giving Garden still grew in spirit. Under the leadership of about a dozen University City High School students – most of whom were part of the original Giving Garden – they planned a new community service project to bring the joy of gardening and food sustainability to the greater University City Schools community.

The program is called Growing Together: The U City Schools Food Garden Network.

The high school students wanted to support food sustainability, and they asked themselves how they could expand upon the concept behind The Giving Garden to create a food gardening network in the larger

U. City community. That network not only would bring community members into existing gardens at U. City’s four elementary schools, but further include University City residents in gardening projects outside of the school district.

After seeing the impact of the pandemic on the elementary and middle school garden programs, the high schoolers wanted to rethink the concept of a “school” garden and increase food security at the same time. As 10th grader Bella Wright puts it, “We connect with one another through a love of gardening. We want people to see that this can happen at their homes and in our schools and if people are nervous about getting started, we are here to help.”

The project got an immediate financial boost thanks to a generous, multi-year donation given by University City residents Ilene and C. Edwin Murray, who met and fell in love when they were both teachers at Brittany Woods in the 1970s.

The high schoolers have established a comprehensive budget that includes signage for network garden homes, plant and material distribution and even prizes for contests throughout the growing season. Thanks to the Murrys’ generosity, a teacher from each school will be given a stipend to help recruit and support families within their smaller school communities. The high schoolers will use social media and print materials to offer general gardening guidance, encouragement and

Continued on page 14

U. City Celebrates Resilience, Growth and Change with a New *How Did U Grow?* Campaign

Gardens embody a spirit of patience, growth, hope, resilience and positive change. Even amid the many hardships and losses presented by COVID-19, our students, staff and families have blossomed by learning new things, finding physical and emotional strength, and nurturing wellness in themselves and others.

In this spirit, The School District of University City will celebrate its students, staff and families later this

spring through student activities, events and a social media campaign that encourages everyone to answer the very important question, How Did U Grow? amid this particularly difficult time dealing with global pandemic.

The How Did U Grow? campaign focuses on helping our community – from youngest to oldest – recognize the power of positive mindset, grit, gratitude and helping others. These attributes contribute to Well-Being and Joy, two key goals in

the District’s ongoing vision of Learning Reimagined.

Though plans are still underway, the community can track future events and activities at www.ucityschools.org/UGrow. Later in the spring, keep an eye out for flower-like pinwheels on our school grounds and public spaces containing messages from our students on specific ways they have grown in the past year, be it through a new skill, a way to lift up others or themselves, and more.