

PARADE

SUNDAY, AUGUST 19, 2012



MEDAL OF
HONOR HERO
DAKOTA MEYER'S
NEW FIGHT

IT TAKES A GARDEN

A TALE OF HOPE,
DETERMINATION, AND LOVE
IN A STRUGGLING
NORTH CAROLINA TOWN

HOW TO START
YOUR OWN
COMMUNITY
GARDEN

TAKING HER PICK
Daniela Berry, 12, in Lenoir, N.C.



FIELDS OF DREAMS

How a community garden helped a struggling small town in North Carolina reclaim its pride



BY
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COVER &
INSIDE
PHOTOGRAPHS
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It's Saturday morning at the community gardens in Lenoir, N.C., and the beds are buzzing. Townspeople are digging, weeding, watering, wiping sweat from their brows, then digging some more. There's Helen Dickson, a 75-year-old retired seamstress who's been raising vegetables since her farm-kid days; Eston Werts, 27, who returned

to his hometown of Lenoir after college and is now a garden manager; Dean Adorno, 24, a tattooed electrician who is reputed to grow the garden's best tomatoes; and his 4-year-old son, Tristen, known for planting *Toy Story* action figures amid the beds. John "Doc" Scroggin, 83, a retired general practitioner, perches at a nearby picnic table providing color commentary. "You notice how spry these old folks are?" he asks. "That's gardening! It keeps you hopping and moving and learning." Together, Lenoir's gardeners form a moving patchwork of shapes, sizes, colors, and ages, all brought together by a love for the soil—and each other. "People may come as strangers," says Werts. "But they leave as friends."

These friendships take many forms.

← **CULTIVATING A SENSE OF COMMUNITY**
Clockwise from top left: Kaye Reynolds, Lenoir's communications and resource director; Jacob Norwood, who maintains a plot with his parents and brother; Sara Mursch, who was instrumental in creating the gardens, with her husband, Dick; 3-year-old Madeline Stark; and retired physician John "Doc" Scroggin with four students he mentors, Kaitlyn Carlton, Tanila Carlton, Shantel Harper, and Felicity Carlton.

"I was raised by great-aunts and grandparents, so I love learning from the older folks," says Paul Norwood, 52, as he pulls up weeds and stakes tomato plants with his wife, Janet, 40, and their two sons, Jacob and Jackson. "Everybody brings something unique." Before they head home, the Norwoods will drop off a bag of fresh veggies for 86-year-old Elsie Harper, who worked for decades at their church day care center and now watches over the garden from her porch across the street. "The gardens don't belong to this neighborhood or that neighborhood," says Charles Beck, 60, Lenoir's director of public works. "They belong to everyone, and they're a

source of pride for the whole town.”

Pride has been in short supply in Lenoir in recent years. In the past decade, the once thriving manufacturing community (pop. 18,228) has watched as one factory after another closed its doors, mostly because of outsourcing to China. All told, Lenoir lost a staggering 8,000 jobs; the unemployment rate (which in 1999 was less than 2 percent) now hovers around 12 percent, four points above the national average. Many residents can't afford fresh food, and two-thirds of the town's adults and one-third of its children are overweight or obese. The two biggest gardens (located on opposite sides of town) are situated on the remains of a burned-down furniture factory and what was once a segregated playground. “They should be called Phoenix gardens,” says Scroggin, “because they've risen from the ashes.”

Planting the First Seeds

Lenoir could be a small town anywhere. Neighbors leave baked goods by the door when you're new in town, and casseroles when you're sick. Church suppers are plentiful. There are block parties and free Friday night concerts in summer and a Christmas parade down Main Street in winter. But driving through those same streets, you also come across boarded-up furniture and textile factories, painful reminders of the town's decline. “I remember when they announced the big Lenoir [Furniture Corporation] plant was closing during Christmas 2006. That was the one plant people said would never shut its doors,” says Kaye Reynolds, 65, the town's communications and resource director. “For some families, three generations had worked there. These were proud people who had never been on public assistance. What do you say when something like that happens?”

Sara Mursch, 76, a retired air force nurse, saw how her neighbors were hurting during her volunteer work at Lenoir's Helping Hands Clinic, where many patients had trouble paying their bills. So three years ago, Mursch, a longtime gardener, came up with the idea of a community garden. “I like to see people eat right, and I knew it would be more meaningful to people if they could grow the food themselves,” says Mursch. “Gardening gives you a sense of satisfaction, and

folks here could use that.” So that spring, she rallied a few fellow gardening enthusiasts from her church, and they pitched the idea to the city manager, Lane Bailey, who donated a half-acre



HOW TO START A COMMUNITY GARDEN WHERE YOU LIVE

1

Recruit like-minded neighbors.

“You could have a piece of land that's perfect, but without a core group of committed people, it will be hard to get the project off the ground,” says Sean Cummings, program coordinator of VINES (Volunteers Improving Neighborhood Environments), a community garden organization based in Binghamton, N.Y.

Green up your thumbs.

Newbies can learn the ropes by volunteering at other nearby community gardens or taking free or low-cost workshops run by state cooperative extension offices. (Find yours at nifa.usda.gov/extension).



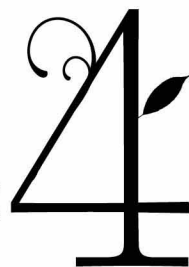
3

Draft a mission statement.

It should spell out who can participate, what's expected of members (a minimum hourly commitment, for example), and what the garden will grow (flowers, veggies, or both?).

Look for a sponsor.

Reach out to local businesses that support agricultural or ecological causes; a sponsor can contribute tools, seeds, and other supplies. If you can't find one, you'll need to come up with another way to raise funds, such as charging a membership fee.



5

Scout out potential sites.

Consider factors such as exposure to light (many vegetables require a minimum of six hours of full sun a day), proximity to water, and the condition of the soil.

→ For more information, and to find out if there's already a community garden near you, visit the American Community Gardening Association's website, communitygarden.org. —*Madonna Behen*

plot for just \$1 a year, as well as city workers to help clear and terrace the hilly, weed-filled land.

Soon, a handful of people became a hundred—including church groups, staff from the local hospital, 4-H club members, even a busload of Google employees (the company had recently set up a collection of computer servers nearby)—who all pitched in to help build beds, plant trees, and nurture seedlings. The first garden was so successful that in spring 2010 another one, spanning 5.6 acres, was added across town, on the site of an old Singer furniture factory that had been destroyed in a fire. In the three years since the gardens were established, eyesores have been transformed into plots bursting with lettuces, onions, squash, okra, tomatoes, beets, and carrots. Mounds of rubble have been replaced by a 150-tree orchard of apples, pears, and plums. The city cares for the land surrounding the beds and supplies water; seeds are donated or are purchased from the sale of surplus crops. Today, there are nearly 100 beds, and anyone in the community can sign up to tend one at little to no charge.

“I grew up on a farm, and eating fresh food every day was just a blessing,” says Helen Dickson. “I come here and it's so nice to pick a good, fresh tomato.” She and her best friend, Mary Norwood, 71, also a retired textile worker, each have their own plots of green beans, peppers, tomatoes, and okra. And they're happy to share their harvest. “If anyone wants to pick something out of our beds, they're welcome to it!” says Norwood.

Hope Takes Root

Across the country, community gardens are blooming—an estimated 1 million of them dot places from Homer, Alaska, to Brooklyn, N.Y., according to the National Gardening Association. “Community gardens make neighborhoods more livable. They become a gathering spot for people, like a pocket park,” says Bruce Butterfield, research director at the NGA.

But in a city like Lenoir, the gardens also offer bountiful evidence of its citizens' hardworking, hospitable spirit. “This is a town that could easily feel sorry for itself,” says Rose Noakes, 64, who runs the local bed-and-breakfast. “But it doesn't. What this town does is take care of its own.”

Barbara Stark, 55, is unemployed and babysits



↑ **HELPING THE TOWN TURN OVER A NEW LEAF** From left: Retired factory workers (and best friends) Helen Dickson and Mary Norwood; Dean Adorno and his 4-year-old son, Tristen. (Tools and other supplies provided by Gardener's Supply Company.)

her 3-year-old granddaughter, Madeline; the pair walk down the hill from her home to the garden almost every day. “Growing here helps me feed my family,” says Stark, who weeds and waters some of the 35 to 40 communal beds used to help stock the local food pantries and soup kitchen. “Many of the folks who come here are trying to make food stamps stretch, so they often bypass stores' produce sections,” says the pantry's executive director,

Sharon Osborne. “You have never seen people get so excited about beans or potatoes.”

“Last fall I took 100 pounds of turnips to our food pantry and they were all taken home within 30 minutes,” says Werts. “It was so moving to see that even something like turnips, which many people would turn up their noses at, went to people in need within an hour of picking.”

Shortly after the gardens' first harvest, David

Horn, who with his wife grows okra, zucchini, cantaloupe, peppers, and sweet potatoes, noticed how often people asked for pointers on cooking their fresh vegetables. So Horn, vice president of business development at Caldwell Memorial Hospital—and a cohost of a popular cable access show called *Two Men and a Stove*—created a monthly cooking column in a local paper.

And last November, the gardens spread their tendrils even further when 12-year-old Daniela Berry asked her dad, Andy, who is the principal at Lenoir's Whitnel Elementary School, if she could create a plot for the after-school program. With help from her mom, Daniela cleared a 1,700-square-foot parcel of land behind Whitnel, where 85 percent of the students are on free or reduced-price lunches. Soon after, she began giving lessons to other kids on how to tend the new beds. “A lot of them didn't even know what a garden was,” says Daniela, “but they were so excited, running around, jumping, hugging me. It really made me feel like I'd done something special.”

On one such afternoon last spring, mother and daughter distributed trowels and supervised as

Community Gardens

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some 30 students planted okra and picked potatoes. The kids took their work seriously, little faces flushed and not one electronic screen in sight. Two hours later, Bryant, a first grader with a big smile that sports an incoming row of teeth, proudly clutched some potatoes to take home. Now he and his pals know where french fries come from. “We feel like we’re helping to feed these kids, and feeding their spirit at the same time,” says Daniela’s mom, Darlene. Since the Whitnel garden was established, five other county schools have planted their own campus vegetable plots.

Scroggin, who holds a master gardener’s certificate, estimates that he’s delivered thousands of Lenoir’s children over the decades, and he loves to see them tending the soil. “I remember one little girl who didn’t trust the advice I gave her grandmother about burying tomato seedlings because she was convinced they wouldn’t grow,” he says. “She kept saying: ‘Don’t do it, Granny!’ So I told her, ‘You think a baby grows sideways? These plants straighten themselves up just like you.’”

Even as Scroggin recalls the economic blight of recent years, his voice is tinged with pride. “I brought a county agent down here to see what we were doing and he said to me, ‘You know what? The vegetables aren’t the most important part. What you’ve raised here is a good crop of community.’” ■