

Gwinnett SWCD Provides Funding For Gwinnett Urban Farming Experience

See Video: “Gwinnett Urban Farming Experience Changes Teen Lives:

<https://youtu.be/7rVGaH34KXo>

Norcross, Georgia (September 7, 2022) – For eight Gwinnett County teenagers, their introduction to urban farming began as a way to help others. “Feed Gwinnett”, a paid youth internship organized by the non-profit *Gardens for Growing Community* (G4GC), emphasizes interpersonal and work skills development while addressing food insecurity, a problem affecting approximately 44,000 children under the age of 18 in Gwinnett County alone. Under the mentorship of urban farmer Gwendolyn Washington and Brookwood High School teacher Carrie Settles-Livers, the interns engaged soil- and aquaponics-based growing systems to produce nearly 150 pounds of fresh vegetables and herbs, feeding almost 50 families during the 26-week program that ran from February into August of 2022.

Logan Zimmerman, a recent Discovery High School graduate, recognized the experience as a turning point in his career goals.

“There was this huge storm and rainwater from the surrounding neighborhood flooded down into the area where we had planted food. It made me question how water quality affects the food we eat. Now I’m on a mission to bring some answers back to my community”, he explained. Zimmerman’s concern inspired him to obtain State water testing certifications this summer, and as a college freshman, focus his studies on water quality.

For rising senior LilyAnna Butler, the experience gave her self-confidence a boost.

“I’m actually shocked at how much it changed me. I’m more outgoing now, and taking risks that I would never have done before. I really surprised myself when I found the courage to lead a farm tour– that was totally unlike me before this,” said Butler. With her newly acquired confidence, Butler raised her hand to lead this year’s environmental club at Discovery High School where she currently attends.

The teens also helped Washington harvest and package her produce for farmers markets, assisting with sales and even running their own booth during market.

“At first it was difficult for me to open up to people at the market, ” admits Camden Rudd, a recent Brookwood HS graduate. “But this experience improved my communication skills. I want to go into vet medicine and I’ll need these skills to communicate with pet owners.”

Despite challenges posed by weather, pests, and in the case of the aquaponics system a damaging power failure, the interns persevered.

“Not many can endure working in freezing cold and extreme heat, but we survived it all. That made me proud of myself, and it was worth it because we could feed so many families,” said Stephanie Ramos, a Paul Duke HS graduate.

According to G4GC founder Tixie Fowler, personal growth is embedded into the program’s vision.

“You can’t connect deeply with nature and not be changed,” said Fowler. “Playing soccer or walking a dog is just 'being outside' and while that’s a good start, when you’re farming like these teens were, you’re truly immersed in nature, in the rain, the cold, the heat, the beautiful moments in between. Our program nudges them outside of their comfort zones, and nature works her magic from there. You can’t help but grow!”

Funding for Feed Gwinnett’s initial program was provided by the Gwinnett Soil and Water Conservation District, through a grant awarded by the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service. Fundraising for Feed Gwinnett’s 2023 internship is already underway, with plans to invite more students, expand programming and increase production. For more information about getting involved with Feed Gwinnett and other environmental conservation-based opportunities for young people, visit www.GardensforGrowingcommunity.com. # # #