

MOUNTAIN CAUSES: GARDENING FOR THOSE IN NEED

JAKE FLANNICK, *Asheville Citizen-Times*, November 4, 2016



Volunteers work at a garden outside the Ferguson Charitable Center in Candler. The partnership between the Mountain Area Health Education Center and Asheville Buncombe Community Christian Ministries uses volunteers to grow and distribute food to people in need.

ASHEVILLE - Tilling a mulch-covered plot behind the Mountain Area Health Education Center Family Health Center for the first time two summers ago, Dr. Eric Smith and a colleague did not have high expectations for the modest garden they helped create to provide healthy food to needy patients.

Many of the crops died, with no more than 20 pounds of produce harvested by the end of the growing season.

"It was a learning year," said Smith, a family physician at the center in Enka-Candler. The primary care clinic shares the building with a branch of the Asheville Buncombe Community Christian Ministry nonprofit social service provider.

This past summer, however, the south-facing garden was far more abundant, yielding more than 1,000 pounds of vegetables. It greatly exceed organizer's expectations of about 150 pounds.

The difference? Soil conditions were ideal amid plenty of rainfall, and the garden was cultivated in the spring with the help of volunteers, instead of after the start of the growing season. Five yards of mushroom compost were used and two raised beds were built.

"It looked like a jungle out there," Rebecca Grandy, a pharmacist at the health center. The tomato plants, she noted, were "taller than we were."

Harvested little by little during their lunch breaks, Smith and Grandy would bring the bounty to a food pantry inside the building. There

were onions, sugar snap peas, collards and spinach.

By the end of the summer, all of the veggies were given away. Some patients would leave the clinic with bagfuls of produce.

The idea to create the garden took root not long after the Ferguson Charitable Center opened in 2014. At the time, the plot behind the 9,600-square foot building was sitting unused, save for a few trees.

It was paid for with seed money from MAHEC as well with scholarship money from the UNC-Chapel Hill's Eshelman School of Pharmacy. Many seeds were also donated by First Step Farm of WNC, a nonprofit substance abuse treatment center in Candler.

The groups are working to address the needs of the underserved population together.

MAHEC provides pediatric and prenatal care at its clinic, among other services. It offers discounts to those who are uninsured and who pay out of pocket.

ABCCM, with its volunteer-run food pantry that also includes walk-in coolers and freezers, also offers donated clothing and furniture, as well as heating assistance in the winter.

Beyond the garden, ABCCM sources food from local growers, and plans to start a juicing program in the near future. The land here could eventually yield more produce, too, including a hillside next to the building that already includes fruit trees.

For Carole Kuykendall, a retired schoolteacher who volunteers every day at the food pantry, the need for healthy food for low-income families is apparent. "Everybody wants fresh vegetables," she said.

This is the opinion of Jacob Flannick. Each month a Citizen-Times reporter volunteers around Asheville and shares their adventure with our readers. If you'd like us to visit your group, contact reporter Beth Walton at bwalton@citizen-times.com or 828-232-5851. More at www.citizen-times.com/mountaincauses.

GET INVOLVED

Both the Mountain Area Health Center and the Asheville Buncombe Christian Ministry are always in need of support and volunteers. For more information about the Christian mission, visit www.abccm.org or contact coordinator Ian Williams at ian.williams@abccm.org or 828-398-6931. To learn about the health center, visit www.mahec.net.