



Urban Farming as a Way to Create a More Global and Welcoming Indianapolis

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Abstract: *A farm tended by refugees has popped up on the west side of Indianapolis. This piece highlights how it is helping a community on the fringes really keep their culture and traditions while also integrating into a new home. An interview with the farm's creator is the main source of information about the project. A lifetime of human rights and international work has led her to this project that has been her best effort to assist a vulnerable population.*

In an effort to more fully understand not only the personal benefits of urban farming, but the societal ones as well, one only needs to look to his or her local community for examples. Not only have farmer's markets popped up in a number of Indianapolis neighborhoods, but urban farming has also become a very popular undertaking in the last several years. One of these projects is directed by Maria Beltran-Figueroa, the Executive Director of Refugee Resource and Research Institute in Indianapolis and operator of the Grassroots Community Farm.

From interviewing Ms. Beltran-Figueroa, the Grassroots Community Farm seems to be a perfect extension of her previous work as a human rights worker and advocate (Beltran-Figueroa, 2011). There have been two farms up to this point, one at the Waterman's Family Farm on the south side and one on the grounds of the Lafayette Square Mall on the west side of Indianapolis. Both are pieces of land that are farmed by refugees who have been resettled in Indianapolis.

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Maria was influenced to start this project by her travels around the world. Living in places like Austria where people paid a significant amount for a small piece of land that they could grow whatever they want in community gardens was one major influence. Another was seeing what refugees she helped resettle into apartments did with the small pieces of land that were next to their first floor apartments. South Asians grew vegetables and Russians grew flowers, showing her the cultural impact of a garden even on three foot by three foot pieces of land. These inspirations helped her develop the idea for an urban farm that would be primarily run by refugees. She also saw a need for people to reconnect to their culture. In order to integrate with their host community, they need to be confident in their own culture and self-identity. Farming is a way to strengthen that connection. Before putting these farms into practice, Ms. Beltran-Figueroa wrote a concept paper.

The Grassroots Community Farm project hopes to achieve the following outcomes:

1. Therapy
2. Income Generation
3. Integration (Beltran-Figueroa M. &., 2011)

The therapy goal is to lessen the traumatic experience of being relocated from a refugee camp where someone had to go after being displaced from their original home. Continuing to utilize talents and perform jobs they held in their homelands is expected to help meet this goal. As many of the refugees who are resettled in Indianapolis come from agricultural communities, this project is a great way of providing farming, a familiar occupation to refugees, as an alternative to the factory and labor jobs that many individuals may find instead. It also creates a better sense of self when one can continue to do what is ingrained in their culture and their family.

Ms. Beltran-Figueroa's background as a human rights worker and advocate made her especially aware of the needs of people resettling into new cultures and communities. The UN Declaration of Human Rights Article 15 states that everyone has a right to a nationality (UN Human Rights Division, n.d.). This farming project is an opportunity to develop the nationality a person has or redefine what they see as their nationality. According to Ms. Beltran-Figueroa, a significant amount of the refugees resettling in Indianapolis were either born in refugee camps or have spent the majority of their lives in one. This makes it important for these people to reclaim their cultural and ethnic identities upon entering a new community. Especially when these backgrounds include farming, this program is an excellent way to make that happen. It reconnects people to their roots, engages them in an activity that they know, and gives them an opportunity to work in a way that is familiar and productive.

Many of the national organizations that help resettle refugees are tasked with finding jobs and housing for people without many resources to go beyond that. Often times, the jobs and the skills of the refugees are not matched up well. Most of the jobs are in the manufacturing sector due to the fact that one does not need to be proficient in the English language. This sector is popular also because of its high turnover and, therefore, large number of openings. (Beltran-Figueroa, 2011). Because of the lack of community this provides, the Grassroots Community Farm is even more important. It gives people the opportunity to use the skills they had before they were forced from their homelands. There is a sense of purpose and satisfaction in working in a way that one knows and appreciates.

People who have been resettled find out about the farm project from leaders in their communities. Many refugees are placed in the same apartment complexes or neighborhoods,

where certain individuals emerge as leaders. They know what is going on in the community and how to get involved. They take ownership of making sure new members get settled well. The Grassroots Farm project works with these leaders to communicate information to the groups and offer resettled refugees the opportunity to utilize their skills on the farm. It also gives the people who farm the land a way to hand out their produce. Most of the farmers distribute what their families do not use to the other members of their refugee community. Ms. Beltran-Figueroa's initial idea was to sell it at a farmer's market, but she said the business aspects need to grow organically from the participants. It could not be a decision made for them.

When turning her concept paper outlining this project into a reality, Ms. Beltran-Figueroa faced a number of obstacles. The biggest impediment was getting the host community of Indianapolis to really understand what the project is about and accept it as an area of growth. The success of the farm depended on the farmers feeling like a part of the community and the city's appreciation of what is added by it. There have also been some security issues since the opening of the Lafayette Square farm (Associated Press, 2011). Theft is not something that is unique to this farm project, but it is a disheartening situation. Luckily, the security problem is not one that deters people from wanting to farm and the buy in from the host community is enough to keep the project functioning.

This project is not unique around the country, or even in the state of Indiana. It is, however, one that is important to the development of Indianapolis as a more global and inclusive city. This project focuses on the integration (moving into the mainstream while keeping traditions and culture of their country of origin, or well-known the salad bowl metaphor), not the assimilation (adopting the mainstream culture and traditions, losing that of the country of origin, or the melting pot metaphor), of refugees and immigrants. "Farming for the [refugees] is a way to start again in an environment where they will be allowed to take back a part of their cultural identity that was lost. Hence, they do not assimilate but integrate to society, based on the principle of unity in diversity." (Beltran-Figueroa M. &., 2011)

The funding for the original Waterman's Family Farm location came from a two-year grant from the United States Department of Agriculture in the form of a Farmers Market Promotion Program Grant. The Lafayette Square location also had land donated for the Grassroots Community Farm use. The additional funding for this location comes from individual and group donations of time, talent, and treasure. A local company came in to till and plow the land and other local groups and individuals have donated resources for water and seeds. Additionally, churches that wish to support the project have donated cash. Without these, and the dedication of Maria Beltran-Figueroa, this project would not be possible.

The income generation aspects of this project create a way for people who are working on these farms to be more financially independent than if they were to only rely on the income from jobs they are placed in upon arrival. Creating this independence also allows refugees to make this community home. Feeling that as an individual, one is self-sufficient also creates a sense of pride that is important to be comfortable in a new place and allows for individuals to be more complete members of society. This benefits the individual, their refugee community, and the larger, city wide community as a whole. The self-sustaining opportunities supplied by farming allow the refugee farmers to spend less of their regular wages on food and more on other necessities. It might even allow them to participate in community events that may have been out of their reach prior.

Integration, as previously discussed, is the end goal for most refugee assistance programs including this one. This project gives people the opportunity to maintain their heritage while also

becoming part of a new community. This is beneficial to both the relocated refugees as well as their host communities. Once these refugees begin to feel comfortable in their new homes, the opportunity to teach others about their rich cultural traditions will arise, helping to make Indianapolis the cultural hub it has the potential to be.

Ms. Beltran-Figueroa's goal with the Grassroots Community Farm project is fulfillment of these three objectives. She hopes it will reconnect refugees to their agricultural background, empowering the refugees and making the transition into a new community and culture less alienating than it already is. She also hopes that people in the host communities learn from the project. If they only discover that there are other people within Indianapolis with cultures that are different from their own, and that these cultures represent valuable additions to the landscape of their community, then Ms. Beltran-Figueroa will feel that the Grassroots Community Farm project has made a positive impact.

Even with its faults, a project like this is an inspirational story. It creates a place for recently relocated people to connect to their heritage, to their refugee community, and to a host community. It is also something that creates stability and sustainability for people when nothing else seems to be lasting.

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