



# Helping People Help Themselves



breaking the cycle of poverty for over 40 years

Catholic Campaign for Human Development  
2014 | Issue Four

## NEIGHBORHOOD FOODS

BY BETH GRIFFIN

**T**he lush green gardens were once hardscrabble vacant lots used by drug dealers. Now they burst with kale, peppers, cucumbers, and tomatoes ripe for harvest. The dozens of plots sprinkled throughout the Haddington neighborhood of West Philadelphia are much more than a successful community gardening program. They are the foundation of Neighborhood Foods, an emerging program that meets a low-income community's longing for local revitalization, meaningful jobs, and access to fresh foods.

Neighborhood Foods uses funds from the Catholic Campaign for



Photo courtesy of Urban Tree Connection.

Human Development (CCHD) to support its myriad efforts in the community.

Skip Wiener, executive director of Urban Tree Connection, the parent organization of Neighborhood Foods, says the ten-square-block Haddington area is “a documented food desert,” which he describes as an area with no grocery store access to fresh produce. Residents rely on processed foods sold in small corner stores. As a result, people in the neighborhood have high rates of diet-related illnesses. Eight of every ten children and almost three-quarters of all adults are overweight or obese, Skip says. Furthermore, residents with health issues might not be able to work. “Residents who are struggling to support their families often have health issues that prevent them from working,” he adds.

The community faces many challenges that compound their health struggles. The predominantly African-American community also lacks educational and job opportunities. Forty percent of the population lives at or below the federal poverty line and most of the children live in households eligible for federal nutrition benefits.



Photo courtesy of Urban Tree Connection.

Haddington is dominated by two large housing projects. Despite a high crime rate, robust drug activity, and the prevalence of automobile “chop shops,” Skip says there is a stable population of retired people committed to maintaining the integrity of the neighborhood. They are the backbone of Neighborhood Foods and Urban Tree Connection.

Skip grew up in West Philadelphia, earned a degree in landscape architecture, and returned to the area in 1999 to work with a youth development initiative. “We were working with kids in a fluid, constructivist way. I asked them to find a spot for a garden and they took me to an empty lot,” he says. “We started to build a garden and it became a hangout for the kids. Then the block captains got interested.”

In Philadelphia, volunteer block captains are nominated by their neighbors

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## From the Director

### Dear Friends,

In this issue, I am pleased to share good news from Philadelphia, where Archbishop Charles J. Chaput supports the work of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD).

Neighborhood Foods has a significant presence in its small West Philadelphia community of Haddington. The organization started by cleaning up garbage-strewn lots and turning them into gardens, but evolved into something much more interesting and serviceable to the residents. Neighborhood Foods has become an innovative agricultural and marketing system in the middle of a downtrodden urban neighborhood and the centerpiece of an ambitious effort to rebuild community.

I think the wonderful thing about Neighborhood Foods is how the participants have used the food and agricultural focus of their project to help rebuild community, strengthen relationships in the neighborhood, and mobilize local talent to address issues.

This is at the heart of what we do at CCHD. It is not just about the issues of health, poverty, and lack of work; it is about helping people grow in love, respect, and service to each other. The confidence and relationships built through the agriculture program have already helped Neighborhood Foods to address other community issues.

I'd also like to tell you about another shining light in Philadelphia and a strong role model. She is Bethany Welch, the recipient of this year's Cardinal Bernardin New Leadership Award.

As the founding director of the Aquinas Center for immigrants and the working poor, Bethany led an impressive effort to convert a former convent at her South Philadelphia parish into an innovative and welcoming space for community organizing, immigrant services, and urban revitalization. The ongoing program is supported by CCHD and St. Thomas Aquinas parish.

I have great admiration for Bethany's faith-inspired dedication to care and advocate for the poor. It's refreshing to see this in a person of her young age! We were happy to meet Bethany in person when Bishop Jaime Soto conferred the award last June in New Orleans.

As we enter the waiting period of Advent, I hope you will remember in prayer all those who await the fruits of justice—and those who work to achieve it.

Gratefully,

Ralph McCloud  
Director, Catholic Campaign for Human Development

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and work with the city government to organize residents around safety and beautification projects. “The block captains had gotten together to get the city to tear down some of the drug houses,” Skip says. “Then they started to identify lots to be planted. We’d organize kids and outside volunteers and the gardens started to assume the personalities of the block captains,” he laughs.

There are 10 distinct gardens spread over 29 lots. Some have themes, including perennials, a children’s memorial, and a rose garden for seniors. Many have ongoing educational programs. All have overcome challenges.



Photo courtesy of Urban Tree Connection.

“There’s been real tension on every lot we’ve been on where drug sales and prostitution had taken place. It’s not so much that we negotiated with the dealers, but as our activities got more intense, the dealers receded,” Skip says. “We put lights up and the places weren’t as conducive to their activities. It’s essentially an ownership shift. It’s a constant challenge, but we’re well ahead and winning”

The transition from flower-growing to food production was inspired by the deficit of fresh produce in the neighborhood, but hampered by concerns about water supply and potential vandalism.

Part of the victory is a thriving three-quarter acre farm lot surrounded by 60 houses. “There is a dormant black Southern farming culture in the neighborhood,” Skip says. “Every

third house had a connection to farming . . . there is an immense wealth of knowledge about farming and land management.”

The neighborhood came together around the little farm. “The older people had grown up with access to fresh food and they were now able to share that with their children and grandchildren,” Skip says. “And what emerged was a social structure the community had not seen before. People who didn’t know one another were energized and came together.”

Neighborhood Foods cultivates its own enclosed farm lot, as well as several other properties owned by the city and local churches. The annual production approaches 14,000 pounds, Skip says. People in the community can buy the vegetables at a subsidized weekly farmers’ market held at the entrance to the enclosed plot. Other produce is sold at full price to high-end restaurants and farmers’ markets in other areas of Philadelphia to sustain the subsidies.

Sales doubled when Neighborhood Foods was allowed to accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits and Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) checks, Skip says.

Neighborhood residents, teen apprentices, and Urban Tree Connection staff constitute the workforce that builds and maintains all of the sites. And at the end of the season, there is a harvest festival.

“We’ve made tremendous progress,” Skip says. “The kids who raise the food are more and more receptive to eating it. Their parents are more challenging. One of the consequences of living in a food desert is that many kinds of produce are foreign to the residents. They don’t know what to do with eggplant or cilantro or squash,” Skip explains. Neighborhood



Photo courtesy of Urban Tree Connection.

Foods provides cooking lessons from local women to help people understand the health benefits and learn to use fresh, affordable food.

The organization is actively expanding its reach into the community to address health and employment issues. Skip says Neighborhood Foods’ partnerships with local churches that host the gardens and cooking programs is “a kind of health ministry.”

Archbishop Charles J. Chaput of Philadelphia says the CCHD-funded Neighborhood Foods initiative “empowers members of the community to be agents of change in transforming their neighborhoods and lives. I’m proud to see the message of the Gospel being animated each day as a result of this collaboration.”

Skip hopes to expand Neighborhood Foods’ successful cooperative model through leadership training and outreach to low-income health clinics and local churches.



Photo courtesy of Urban Tree Connection.

## 2014 CARDINAL BERNARDIN NEW LEADERSHIP AWARD WINNER

**D**r. Bethany Welch is the founding director of the Aquinas Center—a locally funded CCHD group in the heart of South Philly, a culturally diverse inner city neighborhood in Philadelphia, PA. The Aquinas Center is housed in a multicultural, multilingual immigrant parish. The center opened in January 2013, “with a mission to build unity in diversity, support learning, and inspire thoughtful action,” says Bethany. The Aquinas Center is home to urban immersion experiences, counseling services, a legal clinic to help immigrants (regardless of their documentation status), community organizing and advocacy efforts, English classes, and urban revitalization.

Bethany identifies systemic injustice as a root cause of poverty, alongside a lack of access to social services and high-quality education based on geography. She speaks from the heart about how the dignity of all persons informs her work and how the projects of Aquinas Center demonstrate the power of Catholic social teaching. “Cardinal Bernardin worked to build bridges across ethnic, class, and age barriers. Aquinas Center is sitting at the intersection of the very same issues he confronted,” she says. “I am so humbled and honored to be selected as someone who might strive to live like he did. Every day we welcome neighbors and guests from very different backgrounds and experiences, yet desire to be in relationship with one another.”

Joining the Church in 2005 has allowed Bethany, she says, “the opportunity to be myself, to live out what it means to be Catholic.” Bethany’s Catholic faith motivates her desire to promote an authentic “culture of encounter,” which Pope Francis has called each one of us to build. Bethany has worked to infuse this mission into the work of Aquinas Center, especially in its leadership trainings and through community organizing. According to Bethany, “Leadership training and organizing efforts increase the capacity of immigrants and allies to advocate for comprehensive immigration reform. This model bears witness to our values. Everyone has dignity. Everyone has gifts to share.”

Bethany received the 2014 Cardinal Bernardin New Leadership Award in recognition of her gifts and devotion to working in solidarity with the people facing poverty within her community. Bethany and Msgr. Hugh J. Shields, pastor of St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church, came to the spring assembly of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in New Orleans, Louisiana. Bethany accepted her award at a special reception held in her honor on June 12. Over 100 bishops were able to attend and recognize her work for justice.

### What Is CCHD?

**T**hrough the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Catholics and friends of CCHD across the country help poor and low-income Americans to help themselves and their communities out of poverty.

**S**ince 1970, the Catholic Campaign has contributed over \$280 million to more than 7,800 low-income-led,

community-based projects that strengthen families, create jobs, build affordable housing, fight crime, and improve schools and neighborhoods. CCHD requires that projects develop community leadership and participation so that their solutions to poverty will be long-lasting and effective, and so that CCHD’s investment in people will help break the cycle of poverty. CCHD also educates Catholics about the causes of poverty and seeks to build solidarity between impoverished and affluent persons.



An initiative of the  
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