


Helping Neighbors

A NASHUA COUPLE IS SOWING THE SEEDS OF COMMUNITY WITH URBAN GARDENS AND EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS.

“If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.”

— AFRICAN PROVERB



Justin Munroe, executive director of Grow Nashua, and Jessica Munroe, youth education director.

It all started with Justin and Jessica Munroe's backyard vegetable garden. As they planted seeds one early spring day, the couple considered how important the garden was to them – for their physical health, their mental health, for the food they could provide for their family.

Living in Nashua, they knew that many people in the city didn't have the luxury of land to garden on. "We were thinking, maybe we could give a plot of land to one of our neighbors who might be in need," Justin says. They were especially concerned about people Justin calls "new Americans," refugees and immigrants from other countries.

Their own yard was too small, so they reached out to St. Joseph Hospital, which had a large plot of land available, large enough for a community vegetable garden. They then reached out to people who might want to take part. "In our first season, we had 20 different families from 12 different countries gardening in that space," Justin says. "That was a lot of fun. We learned from that, and we have been growing ever since."

That first season was seven years ago. Now, what became [Grow Nashua](#) has seven community gardens throughout the city and 150 families taking part. The raised-bed gardens are placed in "food deserts," areas where people don't have access to fresh produce within walking distance. "Ninety-five percent of our families are low-income families who struggle with access to nutritious food," Justin says. "There are a lot of corner stores, but often they don't have much to offer besides sugary drinks and chips."

The seven community gardens are on land provided free of charge by the City of Nashua and the Nashua School District. The gardening expertise, also free, is provided by Justin and Grow Nashua's host of "garden tender" volunteers. "We help with everything," Justin says. "We're coaching them about what to plant and when to plant." To build a gardener's knowledge, each month Grow Nashua offers virtual agricultural training programs.

The effort to educate extends into the schools. Justin's wife, Jessica, leads a Garden

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– JUSTIN MUNROE

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One of the seven urban gardens created by Grow Nashua since its founding in 2015.

Basics Builder program for fourth- and fifth-graders in three of the city’s Title I schools, schools where on average 75% of the students qualify for free and reduced-cost lunches. As they’re learning soil basics, plant systems, garden nutrition and garden planning, the students put their knowledge to work in a garden on school property.

“It’s experiential learning,” Justin says. “The kids are doing the planting, they’re getting their hands in the dirt, and they’re tasting the food that they grew.” A “Veggies at Home” cooking series complements the gardening. Each month, students take a recipe and a vegetable home to their parents. The hope is that the students’ experience of growing their own fresh produce will be carried into their adulthood.

compostable food waste, which is transported to a processing plant that captures the harmful methane gas produced and turns it into energy. What’s left is eco-friendly compost. “So far,” Justin says, “the program has diverted about 350,000 pounds of food waste from the landfill.”

Fresh produce can also be found at Grow Nashua’s Lil’ Free Farmstands, where donated veggies are available to families in need. Justin says, “Service Credit Union helped us expand the program from one farmstand to three in different parts of the city. They’re also providing a veggie truck that can drive around the city, picking up extra veggies, and delivering them into neighborhoods where we’re not able to set up a permanent site.” Every year, the program gives out thousands of pounds of food.

Grow Nashua does its work with seven employees, some full time, some part time. The food waste collections provide some of the funding, but it mostly comes from fundraisers, grants and sponsorships like the one by Service Credit Union. Plus, there are 300 volunteers who are garden tenders, veggie couriers, Lil’ Free Farmstand greeters and digital tinkerers, people with digital skills who can help spread the word about Grow Nashua. Justin says, “We could not do what we do without the support we have.”

To ensure bountiful harvests, Grow Nashua has a program to create compost. Residents who are part of the program pay a small fee for the curbside collection of their

The intent of Grow Nashua is not only to provide healthy food to people in need and enable them to grow it themselves, but to sow the seeds of hope and community. “When you put your hands in the dirt with other people,” Justin says, “you build rapport. When you’re giving veggies to people, you’re building rapport. All those things create a stronger, more connected social fabric.” ■



Service CU helped expand the Lil’ Free Farmstand program.

