Knowing the Neighborhood Dirt: Sustainability in the Merrill Neighborhood Sharing Garden

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Merrill Housing Initiative
Affordable home ownership project established in 2007 in the Merrill neighborhood of Beloit, Wisconsin, by Community Action, a Rock County-based non-profit organization.

Meet Your Neighbors
Visit: Bike or walk to the garden. It is located at 1328 Porter Avenue, only a mile from campus.
Volunteer: Come to the garden on Saturdays from 9:00am to 1:00pm during the growing season to get your hands dirty. Contact the Campus Community Outreach Center for the seasonal schedule.

Working as a Sustainable Guest
Flexibility: My role in the garden varied depending on who came to the garden and what they needed from the space. I could be a gardener, entertainer, teacher, advocate, and friend.

Balancing a Vision: In working with volunteers and neighbors in the garden, it's important to be flexible in asserting your own vision while still allowing the voices of others to filter in and transform it. The end product may be different than what you expected, but since it forms as a collective product, it will be more sustainable as it is backed by the knowledge and support of those many voices.

Understanding Boundaries: Balancing my ability to engage with neighbors in a meaningful way was always colored by my status as a non-resident of the neighborhood. Coming to terms with this meant understanding inherent empowerment and disempowerment in my work.

Sharing: Share space, share food, share advice, share your best self.

The Merrill Neighborhood Sharing Garden
Serves as a safe and beautiful gathering space as an integral part of the Merrill Housing Initiative.
Offers free fresh produce throughout the summer and fall to Merrill community members.

Maintained by Merrill neighbors, volunteers, Beloit College Sustainability Fellows, and Community Action employees.

Marleigh visits the garden every day to find peace and quiet away from her house across the street which is home to 12 family members. When this picture was taken she was excited to bring home the cilantro and tomato. The next day, she returned with stories about her mom’s cilantro-seasoned pork and plans for a garden in their own backyard.

Each summer the Bike and Build group stops in Beloit as the mid-point of their cross-country cycling journey. Their project supports affordable housing in the United States. In July they spent a six hour day with us building fences, a new bench, and six raised beds for Merrill Elementary School down the street.

Bike and Build pauses construction for lunch and a photo

The Muñoz family lives in the house adjacent to the garden’s back lot. Members of the family can often be heard playing in the yard on their swing set or grilling a delicious-smelling lunch. They take walks through the garden as a family, keeping close tabs on the pepper crop.

The Muñoz and Sustainability Fellow Emily Vogelhuber dig holes for installation of the vertical garden

Creating Change: The Merrill Sharing Garden occupies what used to be a lot where Beloit teen gangs met to sort out drug deals and fights. Now it’s a beautiful space for family gatherings and cross-cultural connections. Change in the physical world produces change in the social world as well.

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