

Growing Home still going strong after 30 years



Growing Home is celebrating 30 years of helping people with job training and providing access to fresh produce. PHOTO PROVIDED BY GROWING HOME.

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Growing Home was founded by Les Brown in 1993. Brown was trying to figure out how to help homeless men. Brown saw gardening and farming as a great tool to help center people and help them obtain transferrable skills. Thirty years later, Growing Home continues to provide access to fresh food through its urban farm, workforce development and service communities that have been disinvested for years.

Growing Home started with a farm in Marseilles, Ill., and moved its operation to Chicago’s Englewood community in 2002. The organization provides paid job training to those who are the hardest to place, which includes people out of work for many years and young people who might not have much work experience. It also focuses on job placement, partnering with employer partners to ensure people who participate in the program receive gainful employment and are able to move up in the work world.

Participants in the program are paid \$17 an hour, compared to the \$15 an hour minimum wage. The organization always strives to maintain its pay rate to at or above minimum wage. Janelle St. John, Executive Director of Growing Home, said the organization is in a unique food space, where it has a USDA certified organic, urban farm, located in Englewood, which is a food insecure neighborhood.

Growing Home is a high production farm, which grows an average of 100 varieties of produce every year. According to St. John, Growing Home’s farm can grow up to 25,000 to 40,000 pounds of food, depending on what is being grown.

Since 2019, Growing Home has committed to distributing no less than 50% of the food it grows to Englewood or communities similar to it. It does this through the Farmers Market, which is held every Thursday on 59th and Wood Street; pop-up events, where it distributes produce at a discounted rate and partner with the Chicago Food Depository. They also deliver food to two local food pantries; and Englewood CSA, where up to 30 residents receive boxes of food at no cost to them every other week.

“What we always try to do is come up with innovative ways of getting the food into the community, but largely focusing on culturally relevant food that’s affordable,” St. John said, adding that what is sold on the North side for a \$1 is sold for \$.50 in Englewood and for those with LINK, it is an additional 50% off.

Growing Home has an operating budget of almost \$2.6 million. The unrestricted funds the organization raises through events like its recent 21st



Annual Benefit allow them to pay the participants, staff and full-time farmers. “We’re a people business, and we do it by people serving people. So, these funds allow us to continue to do the work we do every single day,” St. John said.

St. John believes what has kept Growing Home going for 30 years is that it is a social enterprise and has been creative in securing funding from various sources. Growing Home also has a reputation of good management and has built trust. St. John sees Growing Home as a means to an end to helping Englewood, and no one organization can be the solution to the many issues that face the community. To really address the issues in the community, partnership with other community organizations is imperative.

Growing Home hosts 3rd Thursdays Farm Stand Celebrations from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. at 59th and Honore. The dates are May 18th, June 15th, July 12th, August 17th, September 21st and October 19th. On Sept. 10th, Growing Home and Grow Greater Englewood will host the Second Annual Chicago Urban Ag Crawl and Backyard BBQ.

Growing Home’s Urban Farm is located at 5814 S. Wood Street and the Farm Stand is located at 1844 W. 59th St. Tours are available from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday-Friday. The suggested donation is \$10 per person, but that can be waived for some school and nonprofit groups.

“An organic urban farm in Englewood is unique and something to celebrate. We acknowledge the violence and things like that are real, but the creativity and beauty that is in Englewood is also real. And, that is reflective in this amazing organization called Growing Home,” St. John said. For more information about Growing Home, visit growinghomeinc.org.



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