GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Caring for the Community

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Like a well sustains a village, Hillview Greenhouses in La Crosse, Wisconsin, has been the lifeblood of the community since 1907. As a farm and greenhouse with various owners over more than a century, its bounty has fed people in the area through plentiful times and in the lean years.

Two of the owners, Joel and Jean Olson, purchased Hillview Greenhouses in 1987. In November 1991, writer Kathleen Pyle featured the growers in Under an Acre. At Hillview Greenhouses, a 75% retail operation, variety is the theme. According to Joel, who propagates almost everything himself, "we offer too much variety; more than we should." He grows bedding plants for spring sales, but also expanded his product line to make limited production space pay off year round.

In 2004, Joel and Jean began growing organic produce. A few years later, the couple decided to retire and in 2008 a group of friends and neighbors purchased the greenhouse. One of the friends was Dr. Tom Klemond, an internist and palliative care physician, who had a desire to assist the elderly in the area with a community house destination.

With organic growing assistance from the Olsons, the group formed a nonprofit organization and called it the Hillview Greenhouse Life Center. From a July 2008 article in the Co-op Shopper: "The Hillview Greenhouse Life project seeks to utilize the growth and sale of organic produce to provide practical social support for our aging population, nourishment for our local community and meaningful activity for all its members."

Retirees and disabled persons volunteered in the greenhouse, but after three years Dr. Klemond and the board of directors knew they lacked business and horticultural expertise, says Leanne Carlson, president of what is now the Hillview Urban Agriculture Center.



The people who formed the Hillview Urban Agriculture Center in La Crosse, Wisconsin, after receiving the start-up grant from the Chad Erickson Memorial Fund and the Morris Foundation (both part of the La Crosse Community Foundation). From left to right: Dr. Tom Klemond (Founder), Vicki Miller (Current Vice President), Joe Kotnour (board member), Leanne Carlson (president), Sara Sullivan, (past board member), Sheila Garrity (Director, La Crosse Community Foundation), and Dave and Barb Erickson (Chad Erickson Memorial Fund).

"The HGLC had an elderly mission focus. We wanted to create a physical space where the elderly and the specially abled could garden and act as volunteers. What we learned was that it took a lot of resources to coordinate and educate volunteers," says Leanne.

"Three years ago there was much interest in an urban agriculture center concept. A public meeting was held and 70 people said they would work with it, so we changed the mission to focus on feeding people of all levels food that is good for them," says Leanne. Consequently, the name of the organization changed (Hillview Urban Agriculture Center), as well as the mission statement: To create a healthy community through a local, sustainable and accessible food system.

HUAC received a $25,000 grant from the La Crosse Community Foundation, which was used to pay expenses and the mortgage interest, plus it gave the people involved time to develop a business plan and avoid the sale of the land. A second grant for $30,000 from the Robert & Eleanor Franke Charitable Foundation for Market Baskets: From Hopelessness to Hope provides slow cookers, whole grains, legumes and recipes to low-income families.



Hillview Urban Agriculture Center volunteer Cheri Schuyler shows children the benefits of compost. Plans are in the works to build a new greenhouse on the Western Technical College campus in La Crosse, Wisconsin, where HUAC will have the largest vermicompost unit in the Midwest.

"HUAC has formed unique partnerships with a grassroots food justice organization, a large local healthcare system and a technical college," says Leanne. "Out of these partnerships, the existing greenhouse property, which is located in a quiet residential neighborhood, will be transitioned into four single-family, highly energy-efficient homes of which only 12 currently exist in the United States … the existing greenhouse property is to be used as a demonstration and teaching site for [Western Technical College] construction students and regional contractors to learn how to incorporate sustainable and energy-efficient building materials and methods. In return, Western Technical College will build a state-of-the-art greenhouse near the downtown campus that will house HUAC and its rapidly growing horticulture program, providing a much greater level of visibility and accessibility for both programs," she says.

This past June an auction was held at Hillview Greenhouses to sell the containers, shelves and supplies to

area greenhouses and farmers. In a few months, after the glass is removed from the original greenhouse, the space will be demolished. Local artists will decide what to do with the century-old glass.

The new greenhouse is still in the design phase, but once it's built on the Western Technical College campus, the students will grow the plants grown in the original greenhouse: greens and tomatoes. Leanne says after they explore the market, they will add more plants and sell their produce to grocery stores and restaurants. Three year-round employees will manage the greenhouse when school is not in session.

The new greenhouse site also will house a 5 ft. x 35 ft. vermicompost unit—one of the largest in the Midwest.

"We add pre- and post-consumer food waste from the university cafeteria into the vermicompost unit and then sell worm castings. We bought $2,000 of worms to start, and one and a half years later we are not at full capacity. We've sold $600 worth of worm castings at the local farmers market. People want to garden organically instead of using Miracle Gro," says Leanne.

The elderly and the specially abled will still be involved at Hillview. "Tables can be moved so wheelchairs can pass and then be returned without compromising the growing space," says Leanne. "It is a respite, nourishing physically and emotionally."

"We're growing to feed the community, but our work is to develop community gardens and educate those who have gardens to be self-sufficient, to prepare and preserve their own food," continues Leanne. "Good food should not be a privilege—good, healthful food should be available to everyone." **GT**

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