Learning from Teens

“My adoptive parents abused me and my brother. I felt more safe, tough, and powerful as a tomboy.”

SHARING: Selena Garcia, 16, with her story in a magazine that inspires teens (right).
NOTES FROM THE FIELD | Domingo Morales

My Adventures on an Urban Farm

Who cares about the environment?

That’s what I used to think. I was leaving the lights on all day, taking hour-long showers, tossing stuff that could have been composted.

I heard about an AmeriCorps program that teaches urban farming and gardening to young people in housing projects, but I was skeptical. Farming? I figured that was for slaves. The program would mean a two-hour round trip by subway to the Red Hook Houses in Brooklyn from my mom’s apartment in East Harlem. A waste of time, I thought.

By my second day in Red Hook, I was transplanting flats of tomato plants. It was peaceful, therapeutic. We composted food scraps, we taught kids about the environment, we watched saplings grow and thrive (see page 4). Radishes, turnips, beets, garlic—I started to cook and eat them, because I grew them myself. Before this I worked in a salad restaurant, where I could’ve eaten for free, but instead I went out for fast food.

I learned these farms are supported by The New York Community Trust, this region’s community foundation. New Yorkers like you start funds, and it’s true—you can change lives. Before I’d even finished the 10-month paid service and training in Red Hook, I had a full-time job at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. I go out to neighborhoods to help with composting.

My life hasn’t been easy—I bounced around foster homes for years. But I’ve seen that lots of plants survive harsh conditions. Just like me. Now I plan to be the first person in my family to graduate from college.

DOMINGO MORALES, 23, lives in the Woodrow Wilson Houses in East Harlem. He told his story to David L. Marcus of The Trust.
Learning from Life Stories
Teens help each other through personal, powerful writing

Teens might not listen to adults, but they do listen to—and learn from—each other.

Youth Communication, an education nonprofit, has editors who work with young writers from tough backgrounds, helping them share stories about overcoming challenges. Intense accounts of violence, abuse, bullying, addiction, and other issues fill the pages of two magazines, published nine times a year.

The writers inspire fellow teens by showing how they built a healthy relationship, dealt with doubts about body image, or learned to cope in tough situations without violence. A sense of accomplishment comes from the act of writing and from helping readers.

Youth Communication creates workshops to help adults lead discussions about these stories in classrooms, after-school programs, foster homes, and residences that offer alternatives to incarceration. Youth Communication will use our $50,000 grant to test a curriculum that’s only for girls and young women.

Holly St. Lifer, an editor, says stories by peers are great catalysts for conversations: “It’s much easier to start on a sensitive topic like sexual abuse if you’re able to talk about the author, rather than yourself.”

Neither the male nor the female gender box defines me.
I merged my two looks into something I call ‘tomgirl.’”

—Adapted from Selena Garcia’s “Tomgirl: Why Can’t We All Be Ourselves?” published in Represent, The Voice for Youth in Care magazine

ON THE COVER:
Selena Garcia, 16 (left), at the Youth Communication office in Manhattan. She works with editor Virginia Vitzthum. Photos by Ari Mintz for The Trust

RELATED GRANT:
The Trust supports programs that help adolescents across the City, Westchester, and Long Island. With our earlier support, Comunilife, a health and housing provider, has developed a program to help Latina teens who have considered or attempted suicide. With our new grant of $100,000, the group will document the approaches that work so they can be replicated.
A Service Project Takes Root on Urban Farms

The Trust invests $750,000 to grow produce and train public housing residents to work the land

If there’s a most unlikely place for a farm, it’s probably in the shadow of 14-story brick buildings that make up Brooklyn’s largest public housing development, which includes Red Hook West. Yet there, within a cherry tomato’s throw of its 900 residents, is a one-acre plot bursting in summer with eggplants, kale, and peppers.

This is part of a citywide effort to bring urban farming on a large scale to New York City public housing, training young residents in sustainability while providing local produce. The goal is to create more of these farms in coming years.

As it happens, New York City Housing Authority has lots of open space: Its 328 developments take up nearly 2,500 acres—three times the size of Central Park. And with about 400,000 residents, it has a larger population than Minneapolis or Cleveland.

The farms are the brainchild of three groups: the housing authority, a nonprofit called Added Value, and Green City Force, a federally funded program that prepares young men and women for careers in energy efficiency and urban agriculture. They must live in public housing and be high school graduates or have an equivalency diploma. Those accepted to the program get 10 months’ training, preparing for careers with the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, the City Department of Environmental Protection, and others.

We’ve just made a large grant to this work—$750,000 for the next three years—to help start five more of these urban farms.
Getting Serious about Sustainability
Pros help schools conserve

Quick quiz: What is the second-biggest expense in schools nationwide? Hint: Think heating, air-conditioning, and lights, especially in buildings that opened decades ago.

Schools spend an estimated $8 billion on energy every year, more than on computers and textbooks combined. Districts have conservation plans and sustainability directors, but need help meeting green goals.

With $100,000 from The Trust, the nonprofit Green Schools Alliance will expand a program tested in New York City to 25 districts across the country. It will help public schools from San Diego to Kansas City measure and meet conservation goals.

They’ll join a national competition to save energy and reduce waste.

The Alliance developed expertise while working with schools in 53 countries. It will train staff and students to use a software program to track water and energy conservation upgrades, green roofs, and recycling and waste-reduction measures. It will help schools apply to the federal Green Ribbon Schools program, which encourages sustainability.

WASTE NOT: With help from Green Schools Alliance, the Maspeth High School Green Club in Queens created new recycle-awareness messages to improve the cafeteria waste station.

farms. “This crosses the traditional boundaries of philanthropy,” says Natasha Lifton, our senior program officer for children, youth, and families. “It involves youth development, access to healthy food, and preserving open space.” She notes that participants also get “soft skills” training to prepare them to deal with bosses and co-workers. Those who finish the program get an AmeriCorps scholarship of about $5,700 to continue their studies.

“We’re helping to transform abandoned spaces into hubs of positive activity across the City,” Lifton says.

GROUNDWORK: Green City Force corps member Osvaldo Martinez (above) picks Swiss chard outside Red Hook West Houses. Last year more than 2,900 pounds of organic produce was harvested from this site. Photo by Robin Dahlberg.

Projects like these. Contact Bob Edgar at (212) 686-2564.
**Films Shape our World**

*A donor honors her husband’s love of storytelling*

Environmental documentaries are powerful educational tools. *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) got viewers to take climate change seriously, while *GasLand* (2010) showed the hazards of hydraulic fracking.

But documentaries take an investment of time, and even the most dedicated backers understand these films may not break even.

That’s why the fund Elizabeth Meyer Lorentz set up in The Trust is crucial. In her will, Lorentz asked us to support films that echo the work of her late husband, pioneering filmmaker Pare Lorentz.

Now we’re giving $350,000 to San Francisco’s **Redford Center** (founded by Robert Redford and his son Jamie). We’ll support the creation of environmental films at the earliest stages of development, when dollars and guidance are scarce.

*Above:* A shoot near Niagara Falls for the Redford Center’s *Happening*, a film documenting the clean energy economy.

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**Trotting into Retirement**

*Old horses put to good use*

Providing horses food, shelter, and veterinary care is expensive, so when they get too old to ride, show, or pull carriages, they’re often sent to slaughter. For more than a decade, **GallopNYC** has helped rescue equine retirees.

They have a new life giving therapeutic riding lessons and companionship to New Yorkers with autism, cerebral palsy, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other disabilities.

We’re giving GallopNYC $65,000 to provide vaccinations, nutritional supplements, and grooming to these helping horses.

We manage three funds dedicated to medical and humane care of animals, and we believe the donors would be pleased that they’re assisting animals that assist humans.
For years, New York State’s juvenile justice system resembled a boot camp for criminals. City teens who jumped turnstiles or got caught with marijuana were sent to upstate juvenile prisons. Eighty percent were rearrested within three years of release. Even now, New York is one of only two states that prosecute 16- and 17-year-olds as adults.

With an investment of $2.7 million over the past 15 years, we’ve helped reform juvenile justice in New York. In 2001, The Trust commissioned a report by the Correctional Association that halted a major expansion of the City’s detention system, spurring officials to create alternatives to prison. Our grants then helped expand these programs to help troubled teens stay in school and manage their anger. These programs led to fewer rearrests, saving taxpayers’ money.

In 2011, we backed a campaign that won $80 million for alternative programs across the State. We also helped advocates pass Close to Home legislation that has brought hundreds of kids back from upstate prisons to alternative programs in the City that provide education, mental health, and substance-abuse services.

We all still have important work to do. With our $200,000 grant, Citizens’ Committee for Children of New York will encourage the State Legislature to raise the age of criminal responsibility from 16 to 18, so troubled teens can get a second chance.

Many nonprofit social service workers make poverty-level wages—less than $30,000 a year. These workers, mainly women and people of color, are teacher’s aides, caseworkers, and infant and senior caregivers.

With support from The Trust, the Fiscal Policy Institute campaigned successfully to raise the minimum wage to $15 an hour by 2018 for workers of government-funded nonprofits. The Institute researched the cost of the added wages, helped put together a coalition of nonprofits, and worked to ensure extra funding in the City budget.

Our new grant of $125,000 will support the next phase: creating a career ladder so these workers can move up. Above: Mayor Bill de Blasio announces the wage increases in January.
She Cared About Civil Liberties. So She Gave.

Mary Sherman Parsons could see into the future. Long before Edward Snowden unveiled global surveillance programs run by the National Security Agency, Parsons believed people should be aware of the extent of information collected by the government.

A neighborhood leader on the Upper West Side, she left a bequest to The Trust when she died in 2005: She asked that we support research on how government agencies get information about citizens. She also wanted us to help Americans use the federal Freedom of Information Act to access files on themselves and their families.

We recently helped the American Civil Liberties Union Foundation (ACLU) create a website explaining how citizens can request this information, and the site has attracted 90,000 visitors. We’ve also supported the ACLU’s investigation of the Drug Enforcement Administration’s collection of Americans’ phone records, and law enforcement’s use of license plate readers to track people. Just as Mary Sherman Parsons wanted.

What do you care about?
Set up a fund that will support your passions—forever.
Call Jane Wilton at (212) 636-2563.
nycommunitytrust.org