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Day 25 Greener

Nancy O'Connor: My Eco-Hero

Growing Food Growing Health: a school garden project in Lawrence, Kansas founded in 2010 by none other than Nancy O'Connor. After growing up in New Jersey, going to school to study art in Illinois, and owning a bakery, she eventually moved to Lawrence, where she started volunteering at the Merc Co-op and studied to get a graduate degree in community health education from the University of Kansas.

She noticed the disconnect between people and what they ate, saying "I think the disconnect that most people have with food is what leads to a lot of issues with unhealthy eating, because there's no grounding there". This led into her job at the Merc, where she worked as the Director of Education and Outreach for 27 years, overseeing the Merc's classes, donations, and outreach. She also was the Executive Director of Community Mercantile Education Foundation. She even wrote "The Rolling Prairie Cookbook", which "celebrates fresh produce". Through this work she has inspired many, and continued doing so with Growing Food Growing Health (GFGH).

I actually work for this project, and I started when I was in eighth grade; this is my seventh year working in the garden. In my time with GFGH, Nancy has passed down so much knowledge to me, my coworkers, and the community. GFGH gives youth a chance to get their hands in the dirt and give back to our community. The project has evolved over the years, and from helping other schools start gardens, doing tablings at the Merc Co-op sharing information about our project, setting up another garden at a residential addiction treatment center, and giving our produce away for free at a weekly market at a low-income housing complex, everything we do has the community in mind. It's no wonder that Nancy would be my eco-hero, as she's always striving to do more. My job in the garden has inspired me to study Environmental Studies and Social Justice at KU, and I want to pursue a career in the future focused around environmental or food justice.

At the West Middle School garden, just this year we've grown over 2,000 pounds of produce. We safely package all of it and bring it to Edgewood, an affordable housing neighborhood, where dozens of people get to take home all the produce they want every week. Despite the fact that Edgewood is blocks away from Lawrence's food bank, people have told me that they can't even get transportation there, so with the market we erase the barrier of needing transportation, by bringing the food right outside their homes. This is a true act of food justice. At the residential addiction treatment center, not only are the women able to see this beautiful garden being grown outside their windows where all of the produce gets cooked into their meals, but they also participate in our bi-weekly cooking classes where we show them healthy, delicious recipes grown with our very own produce. Many have said how nostalgic and how calming the garden can be for them, especially in a time of recovering where eating fresh produce is crucial.

This is just a small handful of Nancy's contributions to Lawrence. She cultivates produce, young leaders, and relationships with the community. Lawrence wouldn't be where it is without Nancy O'Connor. I wouldn't be where I am today without Nancy O'Connor. She's an eco-hero, and not just to me.

I'm going to share what I wrote with her at our next workday this week.

My Instagram post about Nancy:

