



# PEOPLE OF PROGRESS FEED A VILLAGE

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MINNIE SAGAR

**N**ot too long ago, people concerned about the needs of the hungry would most likely find their thoughts turning to third world countries. But through the economic declines of recent years, with fuel prices rising and increasing the costs of most items on supermarket shelves, the food crisis has been hitting closer to home. So communities are getting both creative and altruistic as they go about ensuring access to healthy foods for their residents in need.

Melinda Brown is no stranger to meeting the needs of the hungry. She is the current Executive Director of People of Progress (POP), a non-profit organization that got its start in 1974. Originally founded in French Gulch as a food co-op, POP now sits in the heart of downtown Redding off Center Street and has expanded to offer a variety of services to help the area's homeless. Services include information referrals, rent and utility assistance, clothing, bus passes, prescription assistance, and much more. But Melinda has never lost her passion for providing emergency food, and so today POP provides 16,000 people with food for 270,000 meals.

How does she do this? The answer is through a variety of programs. In the early 1990s, POP received a grant to provide curriculum and support for teachers at more than forty school gardens in the area. From there the “Victory

Garden in a Bucket Program” emerged, and school children were raising cherry tomato plants for senior living apartments. Perhaps one of the most enduring roles POP has played in local food production is that it has over a hundred plots in two different gardens on City of Redding land. The Garden at Enterprise Park is approximately 1.25 acres located off Victor Avenue. Having garden plots on city property is something many communities strive for, and since POP had a long term positive relationship with city of Redding staff and officials, it was no surprise when the City offered to include the Enterprise Community Garden into their Parks, Trails and Open Space Plan. That policy decision ensures its use as a community garden well into the future.

To learn more about the second garden, I met up with Barbara Condon. With her long braids and faded denim overalls, Barbara not only appears to be a seasoned farmer, she is one. She started volunteering with the Matson, Mowder & Howe Diestlehorst Community Garden back in 1982 to organize work days and keep track of the empty plots. That's no easy task with a garden that supports over fifty-three 20' x 30' plots. The Diestlehorst Garden grows on 3.6 acres located off of North Court Street in Redding. In the early years, the garden was actually much larger, but under used. In those days

POP had a tractor available for valley farmers who would use classic plowing and disking methods to grow their crops.

In the mid-to-late 80's, the garden saw a change in both the style of farming and the crops grown. As South East Asian refugees moved to the area they brought their own seeds and farming tools and when they saw the opportunity provided by the Diestlehorst Garden they took it. Today, approximately half of those fifty-three plots are maintained by Asian farmers, growing exotic plants such as black nightshade, bitter melon, chayote, fuzzy melon, bottle gourd, and luffa squash.

The other half of the plots are used to grow more commonly known crops like tomatoes, corn, lettuce, squash, and others, and they are farmed by individuals as well as groups. Past groups have included Northern Valley Catholic Social Services Second Home, and today groups like the California Conservation Corp and the Pilgrim Congregational Church take advantage of the rich bounty that these community plots can produce.

Pilgrim Church's pastor Ann Horn and member Nancy Milton were out working the garden the day I was there, and they explained that their ultimate goal is to be a part of the "Vote with Your Fork" movement, meaning that if people are unhappy with the current economic issues in society they can have a tremendous impact by re-thinking how they eat. So, in addition to asking church members to bring in extra food items for those less fortunate, Pilgrim Church has started gardening. The bulk of the food grown in Pilgrim Church's community garden plot goes to their church members in need, and every two weeks they donate food to the People of

Progress's Emergency Food Bank. In the future, they plan to use the garden as a teaching tool and open a kitchen to do canning classes.

Gardeners wishing to work a plot at the Diestlehorst Garden are asked to sign a contract and pay an annual fee of \$60 to cover the cost of the water. They are also asked to donate one bag of produce per year to the food bank. What a small price to pay for a plot that by its very location, next to the Sacramento River, benefits from the views, breeze, and the excellent loamy soil. Terms of participation at the Enterprise Garden are the same.

Now one need not be part of a community garden to share a garden's bounty. When Trey Sherrell and Janessa Hartmann listened to the audio book version of Novella Carpenter's *Farm City* on their way back from a Yosemite backpacking trip, they were hooked on the concept of urban farming. They had long wanted to start a garden in their backyard, but they weren't really motivated to just do it for themselves. So they connected with People of Progress and floated the idea of growing food for the food bank, and Melinda was thrilled.

As a result, they turned their backyard (about an eighth of an acre) into a thriving garden that supports three and a half rows of squash, zucchini, tomatoes, and peppers. This is their first year of the project, and so far every two weeks they have been able to provide an average of three half-full paper grocery sacks of vegetables, which works out to twelve to twenty squash and zucchini per sack. Their goal is to provide POP with fresh produce at least once a week through the winter.

In addition to Trey and Janessa's efforts and the community garden's, another community-wide effort to "Grow an Extra Row" is sponsored through the Shasta Food Group. POP receives raw vegetable donations from all of these sources all year long, donations which help supply their emergency food bank. POP's emergency food bank is open to serve the homeless five days a week and by appointment on Saturdays. With such a comprehensive community wide effort, addressing our local food crisis gets a little easier, which just goes to show it takes a village to feed a village. 🌱

*Minnie Sagar is a freelance journalist covering a wide range of issues related to the environment and sustainability. She appreciates both the art of a good story and the effort it takes to create a good wholesome meal!*



Opposite page: the Diestlehorst Garden. This page Barbara Condon harvests artichoke blossoms.