

Northwest
Regional Sustainable
Development Partnership



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
EXTENSION

NW RSDP MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGE

PILOT EVALUATION TO CAPTURE IMPACT AND LEARNING
THROUGH STORIES, 2014

During the 2014 Spring Semester, the Northwest Region of Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships (NW RSDP) piloted an evaluation methodology called Most Significant Change (MSC). This report highlights the process, the results, learnings, and recommendations for further implementation in other regions.

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Introduction

METHODOLOGY

Overview

MSC is a participatory, dialogical, story-based approach to monitoring and evaluation and is meant to augment other evaluation analysis. It is a tool to help collect, discuss and select stories about significant changes that people experience as a result of Northwest Regional Sustainable Development (RSDP) projects.

Both project participants and stakeholders are involved in discussing the stories and then selecting the stories they consider most significant. This deliberation on the value of outcomes occurs in a systematic and transparent manner.

Goals

- Aims to promote ongoing dialogue and learning about projects and how they can be improved to better meet their aims.
- Helps staff and stakeholders explore the unexpected changes that may have happened as a result of the project.
- Contributes to evaluation by providing information about the impacts and outcomes of a project that can be used to assess how well the project as a whole is working.

Basic Process

Participants share personal stories of change that are collected and interpreted at regular intervals of time.

Stories are then analyzed and filtered through various levels until the stories that represent the most significant or important changes are selected.

Outcomes of the story selection process and criteria for selecting stories are recorded and fed back to participants before to the next round of story collection begins.

TAILORING TO RSDP

Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships has a decentralized structure, with various regional offices acting as regional hubs for projects conducted in those areas. While all RSDP projects fall under one or more of four sustainable development focus areas, the actual makeup of the projects vary between the different regional areas. Due to this particular structure, the decision was made to pilot the Most Significant Change evaluation technique in just one RSDP Region (Northwest).

Also, each RSDP Region has a Board that reviews, approves, and evaluates the various projects. It was decided that the Board would be the perfect medium to help select projects that meet MSC criteria and to engage in the story selection process. While it was impossible to incorporate individual participants from all of the various projects in the selection process, involving the Board was seen as a way to maintain the on-the-ground, participatory structure of Most Significant Change evaluation.

Lastly, because RSDP projects are so variable, and because this was a pilot evaluation, it was determined that using Domains of Change¹ was not necessary and in fact could have limited the types of stories received.

¹ Domains of change are broad categories of possible areas of change, such as ‘change in the quality of people’s lives’ or ‘changes in people’s participation’.

Timeline and Actions

The timeline for this pilot evaluation had to occur within a limited timeframe – Spring Semester 2014. The NW RSDP Region was identified as the region for conducting this pilot towards the end of Feb/early Mar. As such, this pilot had to occur within the time span of 9 weeks. **Figure 1** details the actions for each week.

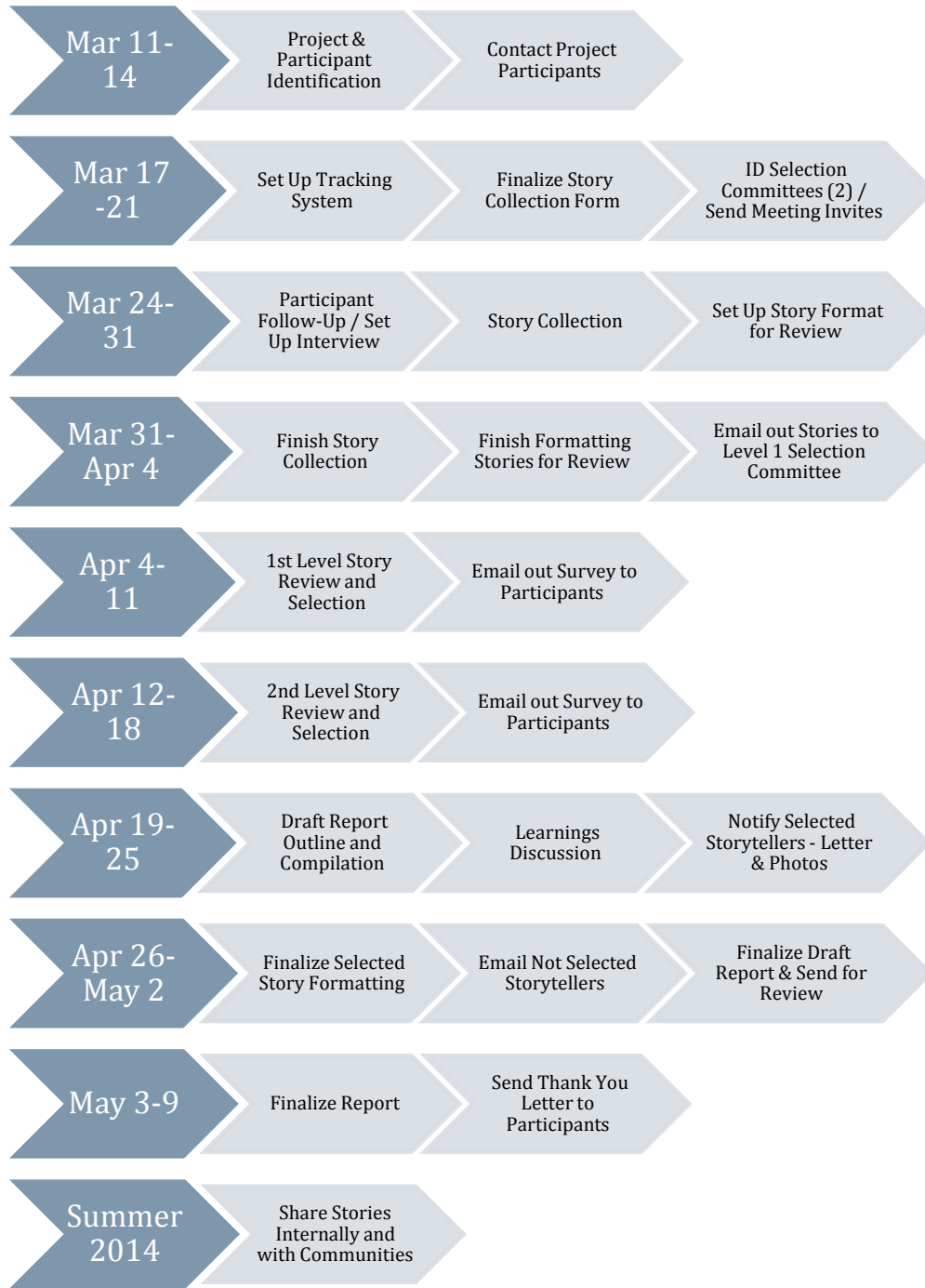


Figure 1: Timeline of NW RSDP Pilot Actions

For each action a team composed of the RSDP Graduate Assistant (GA) and NW RSDP Staff (Executive Director and Communications Associate) determined key responsibilities and coordinated logistics. Importantly, a wide variety of mediums were used to throughout the duration of the pilot to accommodate the fact that not everyone involved was in the same location. This is especially relevant to data collection, as project participants and stakeholders were scattered throughout the region. **Table 1** details the responsible parties and various means used to complete the pilot actions.

Table 1: NW RSDP MSC Pilot Actions Details

Action	Responsible Parties	Medium Used
Project/Participant Identification	NW Board, NW ED, RSDP GA	Meeting, Conference Call
Contact Project Participants/Set Up Interviews	NW ED	Email, Phone, Google Calendar
Set Up Tracking System	NW ED, RSDP GA	Excel Google Drive
Finalize Story Collection Form	RSDP GA, NW ED, NW CA, Extension Consult	Word Google Drive
ID Selection Committees/Set up Meetings	NW ED, RSDP GA	Email, Google Calendar
Story Collection	RSDP GA, NW Evaluation Consultant	Email, Phone, In-Person
Story Formatting for Review	RSDP GA, NW Evaluation Consultant	Word Google Drive
Send Stories to Selection Committees	RSDP GA, NW ED	Email, Google Drive
1 st Level Story Review/Selection	NW ED, 6 NW Board Members, RSDP GA	Meeting, Conference Call
2 nd Level Story Review/Selection	RSDP Dir., Assis. Dir., NW ED, NE ED, RSDP GA	Meeting, Conference Call
Survey to Selection Committees	RSDP GA	Email, Google Survey
Learnings Discussion	RSDP Dir., Assis. Dir., NW ED, NE ED, RSDP GA	Meeting, Conference Call
Notify Selected Storytellers: Letter/Photo	RSDP GA	Email, Phone
Report Compilation	RSDP GA, NW ED	Word, Email
Finalize Selected Stories Formatting	RSDP GA, NW Evaluation Consultant	Word, Email
Notify Storytellers Not Selected	RSDP GA (draft), NW ED	Email
Send Thank You Letters to Participants	NW ED	Email
Share Stories Internally & with Community	NW ED, RSDP Dir., Assis. Dir.	Email, Board, Online, Newsletters, Reports etc.

It is important to note that throughout this process the RSDP GA acted as the overall manager of the project, working with NW RSDP Staff to determine a feasible timeline and approach to completing the overall goals of the evaluation. **The proactive engagement of RSDP staff was crucial to the successful completion of all actions within the required timeframe.**

NOTE: For other situations, where a GA might not be allocated to the evaluation, it is possible that other staff can fulfill the administrative, overall management of the project; however, it is crucial that at least one person who is familiar with the projects and can represent the organization, act as liaison between the MSC participants and the evaluation administrator.

Implementation Details

PROJECT SELECTION (WEEK 1)

- At the regional level, the NW RSDP Board chose which projects to use.
- Built into already scheduled project evaluation board meeting.
- **9** projects total were selected.

Board members were provided with an MSC Packet (**Appendix A**) a week prior to the board meeting. This packet introduced the evaluation methodology and provided instructions regarding projects that were most suited to MSC. They were also asked to pick their top 2 projects and 4-5 people to contact. During the meeting a project matrix was created to keep track of which projects were selected and why (paper and markers) these projects were selected.

Although 2 hours were allotted for this project selection, time ran out before a list of possible contacts for each project could be compiled.

Estimated RSDP GA² Hours: 12

PARTICIPANT SELECTION (WEEK 1)

- Identified at the regional level by the Exec. Dir. and board member input.
- Purposely aimed for a variety of storytellers: participant, administrator, tech advisor, students, University faculty etc.
- Minimum of **5** individuals contacted for each project.

Because time ran out during the Board Meeting, the NW Executive Director, with input from various board members, compiled the contact list of project participants. The list was intentionally compiled so that a wide variety of project stakeholders would be contacted, ranging from project participants, managers / administrators, and faculty, and each project had at least 5 individuals identified for contact.

Notably, this step requires fairly intimate knowledge of the projects selected or knowledge of whom to contact to provide contact information. Therefore, **this step was completed by NW RSDP Staff.**

NOTE: Week 2 was dedicated to sending out email invitations to participate and other administrative items, including setting up the Project and Participant Tracking Matrix in Google Excel, Finalizing the Story Collection Form, and identifying the Selection Committee members for the 2 different levels. The majority of this work was conducted by NW RSDP Staff.

Estimated RSDP GA Hours: 0

STORY COLLECTION (WEEKS 3 & 4)

- **58** individuals contacted initially via email.
- After follow up calls and emails, ended up with a total of **29** stories (~ **50%** response rate).
- Collected in **1** of **3** ways: email, phone call or in-person interviews.
- Phone calls and interviews were recorded.

² GA = Graduate Assistant

- All stories were first drafted by RSDP GA or NW RSDP CA³ and then sent to the storyteller for review or edit before finalizing.
- Stories were between **1-2** pages and consent forms were obtained and confidentiality was discussed.
- At least **1** story was collected for each of the **9** projects.

Story collection occurred within a 2-week time span. While this was initially thought to be limiting, in retrospect this timeframe ensured that a feasible amount of stories were collected for overall timeframe of the evaluation. Collecting more than 29 stories might have been excessive for the amount of staff available.

While a variety of methods were used to collect stories, it is important that at least some are collected in-person as it creates a more interactive environment for the storyteller. For all story collection methods, the goal was to stay true to the words of the storyteller. Hence, conversations were recorded after given permission and the storytellers had the last say in editing their story. Also, stories must be limited to 2 pages or less; otherwise the selection process becomes overly cumbersome.

With multiple story collectors, a system and structure had to be set up to ensure that all stories were ultimately put in a standard format for the selection stage.

Note: This type of story collection is very specific to the individual. While some editing was done regarding grammar and content, ultimately this is the storyteller’s story. To facilitate a more complete story, the story collector can ask follow up questions. However, a downside to using emailed collections forms over a phone call or in-person interview is that often the follow up questions are not quite understood and the additional information is not as rich.

Estimated RSDP GA Hours: 40 -50

STORY SELECTION (WEEKS 5 & 6)

- Broken up into **2** levels: regional and statewide RSDP.
- **1st** level selection committee composed of all regional board members.
- **2nd** level selection committee composed RSDP Director, Assistant Director and **2** RSDP Regional Executive Directors (NW and NE).
- Given very little guidance for selection criteria: “what you think best represents RSDP.”
- Narrowed down to **18** stories at **1st** level (**62%** of original **29**), **10** stories at **2nd** level (**34%** of original **29**).
- At least **1** story for each project was selected at the **1st** level and 1 project was eliminated at the **2nd** level⁴.

Each of the selection committee members were provided with access to the Google Drive folder containing pdf’s of the stories specific to their selection level. They were given between 3-4 days to review their all of the stories. They were given minimal guidance and asked to pick their top 5 stories and be prepared to discuss both why and why not.

While 2 hours was allotted for each selection meeting/conference call, in actuality this was not enough time to go through all of the stories. Instead each person identified their top 5-8 (because some were unable to narrow their list down to 5) and then only those stories that were selected were discussed. The intent was to also discuss why stories were not selected, but there was not enough time.

³ CA = Communications Associate

⁴ See Challenges Section, Bullet 3.

It is important that the discussion as to why stories are selected is recorded. The RSDP GA kept notes of what individuals liked and what they did not like about each of the selected stories. This information was kept in the Project and Participant Tracking Matrix in Google Excel. Later, this information was pulled into the selection letters.

Additionally, after each round of story selection, a Google Survey was sent to selection committee members.

Selection Committee Survey Questions⁵

- Throughout this story selection process, what do you think worked well or was effective?
- Throughout this story selection process, what do you think did NOT work well or was NOT effective?
- How can we improve this story selection process for selection committee members?
- Would you have wanted more guidance in selecting the stories? If so, what type of guidance would have been useful?
- How do you see you RSDP using these stories?
- Anything Else?

Stories Not Nominated

Unfortunately, this evaluation technique requires the organization to narrow down the ultimate list of stories. It was an extremely difficult process to narrow down the stories list down to 10 Nominated stories.

RSDP greatly appreciates everyone's participation and plans on using ALL stories for learning and evaluation, whether or not they were nominated. **Appendix E** is a compilation of all the stories that were not one of the final 10 nominated.

Note: While many would have preferred more guidance regarding selection, it was beneficial to have the varying perspectives and strategies for valuing certain stories over others. By not providing specific guidance, individuals were forced to think of their own values and this allowed for a diverse range of stories selected at each of the levels.

Estimated RSDP GA Hours: 15

ADMINISTRATIVE MANAGEMENT

- Letters:
 - Invite to participate in pilot;
 - Thank you to selection committee;
 - Story selection letters;
 - Story not-selected letters;
 - Thank you for participation letters w/survey & final product.
- Templates and other Documents:
 - Story collection form;
 - Tracking system for all components of pilot;
 - Story review template;

⁵ All Questions were asked of both Level 1 and Level 2 Selection Committees, except for the last question, which was asked of just the Level 2 committee.

- Story publish template;
- Info packet for board members;
- Final report.
- Meetings & Calls
 - Set-up interviews;
 - Set-up conference calls / meetings;
 - Planning calls

These various administrative duties were done by both the RSDP GA and the NW RSDP Staff. Many, but not all, of these occurred throughout the various implementation stages discussed above.

Estimated RSDP GA Hours (Weeks 6-9): 30

Story Uses

Below is a list of possible ways in which these stories can be used. This list was compiled from the following: selection committee surveys, MSC Learnings meeting/conference call, email exchange, and sharing of the MSC Pilot with Extension's Evaluation Committee.

- NWRSDP board and work groups.
- UMC leadership.
- NW Regional Extension Leadership Team.
- NW Happenings Newsletter, to feature one or two stories per month using the framing of introducing the method, and highlighting compelling stories.
- Turn the stories into a PowerPoint Presentation that can be used to communicate with stakeholders.
- Input the Stories into the Impact Data Base 6.
- Include in the UMN Extension Federal Report.
- General RSDP webpages, social media, in news releases and other promotional material.
- Give the stories back to the storytellers so they can use it for their personal needs and career advancement.
- RSDP conferences and meetings.
- Human interest stories in local/regional media, maybe as a cluster of stories all together or individually.
- MN Tourism promotion – groups/ organizations who work in this industry.
- Show to legislators and St. Paul deans and partners.
- Combine stories with other media, such as video, or additional interviews with other story elements. For example the grocery store that purchases the produce from the storyteller.
- Use the stories for program improvement. We might ask ourselves what we are learning about our program and approach that leads to the most compelling stories. Or what are the essential factors in the best stories.
- Use the stories to learn from other regions and from cross-regional projects.
- Share stories about projects and project impacts with key influencers inside and outside the U, and to raise awareness with the public about the presence and focus areas of the Regional Partnerships.

⁶ Suggested by Scott Chazdon – contact him for contact information.

- Regional and statewide newsletters, fact sheets, etc., pitches to internal extension "news" outlets.

Challenges

- **Hard to grasp language of “significant change”** - had to explain that we are looking for the perceived impact of the project on the community/individual/beneficiaries etc. Sometimes misunderstood us to be asking about a significant change that occurred in the project itself.
- **Pick projects that have been in implementation mode for a number of years**, especially for agriculture-related projects as they have seasons.
For example - the community garden project has not actually produced food yet so in talking to these individual's they are finding it difficult to ID MSC.
- **Don't pick projects that have been implemented by others for years** and RSDP involved for only 1 year: “claiming others impact”.
- **Some stories would have been more complete if they had been combined into one** – nature of the technique. Tradeoff between personalized story and only seeing a piece. Some people are better story tellers than others.

Initial Lessons Learned

- **At Selection Level: Different people will value stories differently.** Some people saw more value in stories that highlighted impact for community or individual, while others saw more value in stories that directly connect RSDP to the impact.
- **Highlighted and captured stories that staff knew where out there but where never captured**
 - “Now we can share them with partners, boards and one another.”
- **The process highlighted ways to improve programming:**
 - Stories not selected because often the tellers didn't know what their connection was to RSDP
 - “We [RSDP] are invisible...learned we need to get better at being visible to participants.”
 - Stories that were selected were ones where RSDP had a long relationship and sometimes a series of projects in continuum.
 - The project went from small-scale to big-scale.
 - “We need to be intentional about what it means to take projects to the next level.”
- **Very time and resource intensive**, especially at the front end during data collection.
- Stories provide insight about RSDP, which is valuable.
 - “Sometimes **when we see it in a story we see our reflection in that story.**”

Recommendations for Further Implementation

Most Significant Change evaluation is a unique method for collecting data regarding project impact in situations where data is not easily quantified. This methodology can also provide evaluative feedback to improve programming as well as communications pieces for sharing with the public and stakeholders.

Because the technique is resource intense, its implementation needs to be spread out amongst the various regions. **Below is a possible timeline for future implementation into the other RSDP Regions:**

- Spring 2015 – Northeast
- Fall 2015 – Central
- Spring 2016 – Southeast
- Fall 2016 – Southwest
- Spring 2017 – Northwest (full circle to original pilot region 3 years later)

Once MSC has been used in all regions, a synthesis discussion and analysis regarding the evaluation as a whole would be useful. Also, discussions regarding whether or not to continue with the method need to occur, and if so, determine if adjustments need to be made to capture specific programmatic impacts.

OTHER SUGGESTIONS REGARDING IMPLEMENTATION INCLUDE:

- Prior to Selection Level 1, incorporate a Pre-Selection Level, where the RSDP GA and RSDP Staff set aside stories that don't meet certain requirements.
 - If pursued, the requirements would need to be defined carefully to not lose story variability.
 - Only pursue this if there are an exorbitant amount of stories collected – over 25 for example.
- Give story selection committees more time to review stories and send a reminder email prior to the selection meeting.
- Rather than providing access to each individual story as a pdf, combine all stories into 1 pdf, for ease of printing and review.
 - Consider sending stories as a word document to allow for commenting during the review process.
- Allot more time for story selection meetings so that discussion of why stories are not selected occurs.
- Provide a bit more guidance to selection committees regarding story purpose and make clear that stories can be used both internally (for RSDP/Extension/University learning) and externally (for sharing RSDP's work and impact in communities). Possible language to include all three below, emphasizing all are possible:
 - "If we think about the process being for improvement of the program at the regional level, the range of stories is essential."
 - "If we think about using these stories to convey the value of the RSDP program to the University, we might choose stories that show involvement of faculty and students."
 - "If we think about using the stories to convey the value of the RSDP program to the regional or statewide public, we will select stories that inspire others to develop a robust partnership w/ the U."

References

- Dart, J. & Davies, R. (2003). A Dialogical, Story-Based Evaluation Tool: The Most Significant Change Technique. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 21(2), 137-155.
- Knowledge Sharing Toolkit. (2014). Most Significant Change. Retrieved from <http://www.kstoolkit.org/Most+Significant+Change>.
- Lennie, J. (2011). The Most Significant Change technique: A manual for M&E staff and others at Equal Access. Retrieved from http://betterevaluation.org/sites/default/files/EA_PM%26E_toolkit_MSC_manual_for_publication.pdf.

Appendix A – MSC Packet for NW RSDP Board

MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGE (MSC) NW REGION EVALUATION PILOT

PACKAGE FOR THE MARCH 11TH NW RSDP BOARD MEETING

Dear NW RSDP Board,

My name is Tatyana Venegas Swanson and I am currently the Program Evaluation Graduate Research Assistant based in St. Paul. I've been tasked with piloting an evaluation methodology called Most Significant Change (MSC), and Linda has volunteered the NW for this pilot evaluation. This Packet provides you with instructions for this upcoming board meeting related to MSC and also provides you with some context pieces such as the pilot timeline, draft script for contacting participants and general MSC overview. At the end I've included a basic primer on MSC for your reference.

Thank you and feel free to contact me if you have any questions at veneg008@umn.edu.

Tatyana Venegas Swanson

Masters in International Development Practice (MDP) Candidate | 2014
Humphrey School of Public Affairs | University of Minnesota | Twin Cities
Student Representative | MDP Program Committee
President | Interdisciplinary Perspectives on International Development (IPID)
Program Evaluation Graduate Assistant | Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships

INSTRUCTIONS

During the March 11th meeting we will select the projects and participants we would like to participate in this pilot evaluation. This requires you to complete the following prior to the meeting:

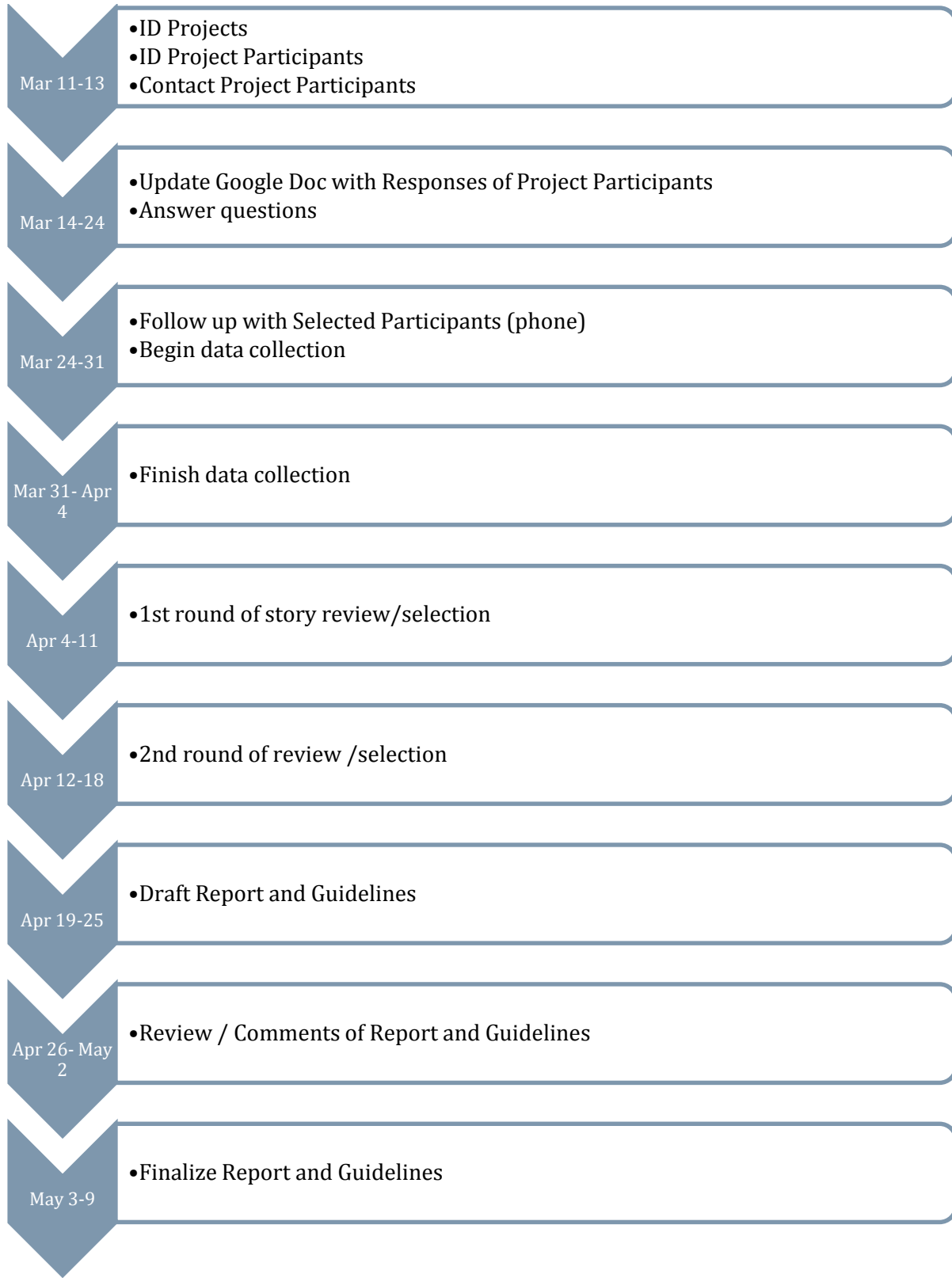
- As you review your assigned projects, please come to the meeting with 1-2 projects selected as well-suited to MSC. Use the enclosed (below) **Project Contexts that are Well-Suited for MSC Evaluation** for helping you to select your projects.
- Be prepared to list why you think your chosen projects are well-suited for MSC Evaluation.
- Come with up to 4-5 people who you think will be good to contact as participants in the evaluation. For these individuals, what matters is that they actively participated in the project – they can be from any entity, whether that is community, university or others.

PROJECT CONTEXTS THAT ARE WELL-SUITED FOR MSC EVALUATION:

(These are general attributes for projects that would be well-suited to MSC – not all are absolutely necessary)

- Project involves a variety of participants beyond just the main project partner.
- Complex and produce diverse and emergent outcomes.
- Large with numerous organizational layers.
- Focused on social change.
- Participatory in ethos.
- Designed with repeated contact between partners directly involved and participants.
- Struggling with conventional monitoring systems.
- Highly customized services to a small number of beneficiaries.

TIMELINE



DRAFT SCRIPT FOR CONTACTING POTENTIAL MSC PARTICIPANTS

The Northwest Regional Partnerships is conducting a pilot project of an evaluation technique called Most Significant Change (MSC) during the months of March – May, 2014. MSC is a participatory, dialogical, story-based approach to evaluation and is meant to augment other evaluation analysis. It is a tool to help collect, discuss and select stories about significant changes that people experience as a result of RSDP projects.

We are excited about this pilot project because it is highly participatory and designed to capture project impacts that may not be easily quantified. Both project participants and stakeholders are involved in discussing the stories and then selecting the stories they consider most significant. This deliberation on the value of outcomes occurs in a systematic and transparent manner.

The [Project Name] project has been selected by the NW Regional Board for participation in this pilot because it is [list why project was selected]. As a key project participant, we would like to know if you are willing and able to participate in this pilot project during the time period [List Dates].

If you are interested in participating in this pilot evaluation, enclosed is a Story Collection Form. You can answer these questions either via email, over the phone, or (where possible) via an in-person interview.

If you decide to respond to these questions via email, please send them to:

[Individual's Name], [Position] – [Contact Information]

You are also welcome to contact her with any questions or concerns you may have. If we don't hear back from you within the week, either with your story or with a preference in how to share your story, someone from RSDP will be in touch. Also outlined below are the overall goals of this pilot evaluation, for your general reference.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

[Name, Position]

GOALS OF THE PILOT MSC EVALUATION:

- Aims to promote ongoing dialogue and learning about projects.
- Helps staff and partners explore the unexpected or negative changes that may have happened as a result of the project.
- Contributes to evaluation by providing information about the impacts and outcomes of a project that can be used to assess how well the project as a whole is working.

PRIMER ON MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGE (MSC) MONITORING & EVALUATION TECHNIQUE

Specific to the Regional Partnerships context and use

Overview

MSC is a participatory, dialogical, story-based approach to monitoring and evaluation and is meant to augment other evaluation analysis. It is a tool to help collect, discuss and select stories about significant changes that people experience as a result of RSDP projects.

Both project participants and stakeholders are involved in discussing the stories and then selecting the stories they consider most significant. This deliberation on the value of outcomes occurs in a systematic and transparent manner.

Goals

- Aims to promote ongoing dialogue and learning about projects and how they can be improved to better meet their aims.
- Helps staff and stakeholders explore the unexpected or negative changes that may have happened as a result of the project.
- Contributes to evaluation by providing information about the impacts and outcomes of a project that can be used to assess how well the project as a whole is working.

Basic Process⁷

Participants share personal stories of change that are collected and interpreted at regular intervals of time.

Stories are then analyzed and filtered through various levels of RSDP until the stories that represent the most significant or important changes are selected.

Outcomes of the story selection process and criteria for selecting stories are recorded and fed back to participants before to the next round of story collection begins.

References

Dart, J. & Davies, R. (2003). A Dialogical, Story-Based Evaluation Tool: The Most Significant Change Technique. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 21(2), 137-155.

Knowledge Sharing Toolkit. (2014). Most Significant Change. Retrieved from <http://www.kstoolkit.org/Most+Significant+Change>.

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⁷ (Lennie, 2011)

Appendix B – NW RSDP Story Collection Form

NW MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGE (MSC) PILOT - STORY COLLECTION FORM

BACKGROUND

The Northwest Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships would like to capture stories of significant change that may have resulted from their partnerships in this region. This will help us to improve what we are doing, enable us to celebrate the successes together as well as being accountable to our funders.

The stories and information collected from these interviews will be used for a number of purposes including:

- to explore what RSDP partners in the NW Region have achieved already
- to help RSDP understand what people in the NW Region value, and support more of these sorts of outcomes
- To acknowledge and publicize what has already been achieved.

CONTACT DETAILS

The Primary contacts for this project are:

Tatyana Venegas Swanson, RSDP Program Evaluation Graduate Research Assistant
veneg008@umn.edu / 907-947-2277

Ruth Navarro, NWRSDP Communications Associate
nava0085@crk.umn.edu / 218-280-6364

Linda Kingery, NW Region Executive Director – RSDP
kinge002@umn.edu / 218-281-8697 O / 218-407-0065 C

CONFIDENTIALITY

We may like to use your stories for reporting to our funders, or sharing with our Partners.

Do you, (the storyteller):

- Want to have your name on the story (tick one) Yes No
- Consent to us using your story for publication (tick one) Yes No

Name of storyteller* _____

Name of person recording story (If Applicable) _____

Location _____ Date _____

*** Write *anonymous* if the storyteller chooses to remain anonymous**

QUESTIONS

Q1: Tell me how you (the storyteller) first became involved with RSDP **Connecting Children and Nature** and what your current involvement is:

Q2: I'd like you to think about an example of significant change that resulted from Connecting Children and Nature:

- There may have been many changes, great and small, positive and negative. Choose the change that you feel is most significant.
- The significant change you choose can be in:
 - the lives of the beneficiaries of the project in which you worked,
 - the lives of individuals in the community where you lived,
 - colleagues with whom you worked,
 - an aspect of the organization with which you worked, or
 - the wider policy environment
- If choosing one change is too difficult, feel free to describe more than one (using further forms).

And here are some guidelines for telling the story:

- Describe who was involved, what happened, where and when.
- Include enough detail to make it understandable by someone not familiar with your project and to make it possible to follow up later to see if the change has continued.

Q3: Why was this story significant to you?

- What difference has it made/will it make?
- Why do you think this difference is important?

Q4: Describe how being involved in this project contributed to changes in yourself:

For example:

- How did it change your understanding of the issue?
- How did it change your relationship with project participants?

Q5: Is there anything else you'd like to add to your story? Give your "news story" a headline, summarizing it in a few words.

Headline:

Appendix C – Selected Story Notification Letter

(Next Page)

Northwest Partnership

Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships

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www.regionalpartnerships.umn.edu/northwest/



APRIL 21, 2014

Dear Wayne Goeken,

As one of the 30 story tellers involved in the **NW RSDP Most Significant Change Pilot Evaluation**, I'm writing to provide an update on where the evaluation currently stands. Below is an outline of the story selection process used, but most importantly we wanted to inform you that your story, **Paddling With a Purpose and Making Watershed Connections**, was **1 of 10 stories selected for best representing how NW RSDP programming creates most significant change**.

Your story was selected because it illustrates the difference that the project is having in the lives of the students - their growth and awareness of the environment and appreciating the consequences of the relationship of land and water.

RSDP sees themselves using this story primarily for communication and awareness building purposes, but all stories will help RSDP improve their community engagement.

In order to finalize your story, we will be formatting the story so that it includes an introduction to the project, River Explorers, and 1-2 photos you would be willing to provide with a University Extension Photo Release Form. **Please provide this photo(s) and photo release form ASAP, but by April 29, 2014, at the latest.**

Story Selection Timeline & Details

- April 4, 2014: Finalized story collection and distributed stories to level 1 selection committee.
- April 10, 2014: 1st level story selection meeting comprised of 6 NW RSDP Board Members.
- April 16, 2014: 2nd level story selection meeting comprised of the RSDP Director, Assistant Director, NW RSDP Executive Director and the NE RSDP Executive Director.

Thank you for your participation in this evaluation and I will be in touch again with the formatted version of your story as soon as I receive the photo(s) and release form.

Warm regards,

Tatyana Venegas Swanson

RSDP PROGRAM EVALUATION GRADUATE ASSISTANT

Appendix D – Final Nominated Stories

(Next Page)

NW Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships: Most Significant Change Pilot

FINAL SELECTED STORIES

Compiled by Tatyana Venegas Swanson, RSDP Program Evaluation Graduate Assistant

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Leadership Fostered by Evidence-Based Advocacy

By Abbey Wemimo, Former NW RSDP Intern & Researcher

Farm-to-College Project

Students from the U of M Crookston participated in the SELF Sustain event at U of M Morris in 2011. In 2012 a Food Advisory Board was initiated on the U of M Crookston campus. Student Abby Wemimo conducted qualitative research on “The Importance of Sustainability to the U of M Crookston student body” (2012/2013). Student interns visited the Cornucopia Farm at the U of M Twin Cities campus in 2012. A Real Food Challenge was started to help establish a quantitative rubric for U of M Crookston dining services in 2013.



Photo 1: Abbey Wemimo

I became involved in the Farm to College project in the twilight of my junior year at UMN Crookston. I was employed by NW RSDP for a summer internship and my supervisor was Linda Kingery. My main focus in this role was to see how we could fund the project and how to make it a huge presence on campus. I ended up carrying

out some food research for RSDP that turned into a published white paper that focused on the need for a farm to college project at the University and the NW region. I looked at the positive externalities associated with the project and its importance to the University. My last act as an intern was to conduct a qualitative research study analyzing the student perspective at the dining halls. The results were staggering and because of this study the University took on some changes that are very exciting. They started a compost program and the farm to college program is moving forward.

While I worked on this project, I was able to present my work on the state of the farm to college program at conferences and workshops. So I was very proud of my work and being able to work on the project. I published a white paper titled “Fostering Local Food Procurement: Promoting Sustainable Practices.” This was very exciting for me. I was also able to visit some of the other University campuses that were doing work on local foods and sustainability and was able to show our stakeholders at UMN Crookston why these different

components were important. This was one of the most interesting pieces of my work because I was able to put theory into practice and make a case for a lot of the programing outlined in the white paper.

As a result of conducting this evidence-based advocacy work through RSDP, the University has actually responded and is putting in place different pieces...to make the farm-to-college program a reality.



Photo 2: Student Interns Visit Cornucopia Farm, U of M Twin Cities

So overall, this was a very personally enriching experience to be a part of. I published my work, I presented my findings, I talked to high level stakeholders such as the University Chancellor and Vice Chancellor, and I further developed my research

abilities. I gained very important research and advocacy skills, all in pursuit of the farm to college project and understanding local food procurement. I learned so much both personally and academically.

As a result of conducting this evidence-based advocacy work through RSDP, the University has actually responded and is putting in place different pieces, from composting to a sustainability fellow, to make the farm to college program a reality. I heard that the University has \$30,000 set aside for this project, and we when we

were advocating for it, we were just asking for \$10,000. It is so exciting to see my and RSDP's work being taken seriously by University administration. This response is largely due to the magnificent leadership by Linda, who provided guidance and motivation. So I think all of this would not have been possible without the leadership of Linda and RSDP - who was an excellent mentor, supervisor and always brought her creativity to the table. I give kudos to Linda and her leadership.

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University Collaboration Creates Lasting Change

By Virajita Singh, UMN Project Partner - Collaborator

Baudette Depot Project

NW RSDP collaborated with the U of M Design Center for Community Resilience Program to provide support to create renderings of the Baudette Depot depicting the visions and ideas of the community members. These design documents aided the Depot Preservation Alliance in fundraising and gaining community support. The NW RSDP also provided support for a rain garden workshop that resulted in the construction of an on-site rain garden.

We were involved in the Baudette Depot project through Linda Kingery. As we were beginning our design assistance work for greater MN and other communities (the program is now called Design for Community Resilience), Linda approached us about the Baudette project. This project became one of the projects we worked on with RSDP. Along with Linda and Joanne Kellner, the Depot Preservation Alliance (DPA) Representative, we discussed the possible needs of the project and outlined what we could offer through our Center for Sustainable Research.

vital use to the community. They recognized that the building had value, or at least the potential for value, for future generations. I also noticed how these small communities often have a lot of vision and hope, but not always the resources or expertise locally. It also became clear to me that RSDP plays an important role in these communities. Because they are so grounded in the community, with their citizen-led boards with local meeting and local board members, and because they are also grant makers, RSDP can actually offer communities resources and funding.



Photo 1: The Baudette Depot

There are many aspects of change in this story. From the perspective of the community and the DPA, I saw a really enterprising community that was committed to doing something with the Depot over the long term. The Depot was purchased for a very small amount of money back in 1987, or thereabouts, and the community had hung on to the building with a vision of turning it into something of

I came away from this project with a deeper understanding of the power and value of working with Minnesota communities.

From the perspective of our team within the Design for Community Resilience program, being involved in this project had an impact on many levels. We had a graduate student who turned down a teaching assistantship in order to be involved in the project as a graduate assistant. He was a Fulbright Scholar from Belgium and had very diverse experience from both the architecture side as well as the international perspective. The fact that he turned down the teaching assistantship made me realize that our program should be providing students with many more opportunities to do meaningful work in service of communities.

We also were able to get an undergraduate student involved through the UROP (Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program). This student was originally from Cambodia, but had come to the U.S. from a refugee camp in Thailand. As for myself, I have lived in the U.S. since 1996, but originate from India. So I found it really interesting that we had very international team members working on this project on the edge of the MN-Canadian border. When we went to Baudette, the U.S./Canadian immigration post was right there. This was poignant because all of us had gone through an immigration post at one point in our lives.



Photo 2: The Baudette Depot Project

From a personal perspective, I came away from this project with a deeper understanding of the power and value of working with Minnesota communities. The wisdom that people like Joanne carry is very inspirational – they are a powerhouse in terms of energy and commitment towards the community. Also, at the time the financial crash on Wall Street was happening and I remember thinking: while the Twin Cities and other places were all in a tizzy, in places like Baudette, life went on. People continued doing what they do, like harvest wild rice. It seemed like communities that are more connected to the land and on a smaller scale to the people and each other, are more resilient. That is what

we are interested in when talking about sustainability - not just from an environmental perspective, but also from the social and economic perspective. This experience gave me a glimpse of the strength of our communities.

While I haven't been able to return to Baudette, I thought it was amazing when they officially opened up in 2012. When we were involved, the project only had a few resources, so part of our role was to create documents that were clear and created a vision, visually, so that more fundraising would be possible. The fact that the project was added to and completed speaks to the fact that our contribution made a difference and contributed to a large degree towards the project's next steps.

Lastly, this project highlighted for me the potential for the University to be an intermediary. Sometimes there is tension when the University does work on a project because the consultants may see the University as competition. But our role is really to be the intermediary between the community and the consultants. If we can bring our research and perspective to the community, then the community is able to clarify their vision, and this helps the consultants. That is how we approach these situations but it isn't always clear how the consultants see it. But in this case, the firm that was involved was very happy with the work that we did and felt it was the perfect launching point.

Ultimately, my goal is to continue to create these opportunities for both the communities and the students. The communities need to be able to access the expertise in design and sustainability while the students need the chance to work on real life projects. While we've done many more projects since then, there is still the issue of scale and capacity. We really need to go to the next level - go to more communities and create more opportunities for students. So this is something that I am still working on and perhaps this storytelling will contribute to that. More people will hear about this story and this will help create more opportunities.

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The Local Foods College Inspires a Family Business

By Bob and Joseph Pickle, Project Participants

Local Foods College Project

The Local Food College started in January of 2012 in collaboration with the Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP). Participants learned from practitioners, educators, and those involved in the growing movement to build resilient local foods systems. Participants chose their level of participation and viewing location. Some of the topics include: Soil Quality and Fertility; Specialty Products: Asparagus, Garlic, Wild Foods; Harvester Handbook; Tree Fruit and Berries in High Tunnels. NW RSDP also gained support from e-learning in Extension and the use of Moodle and Qualtrics was also implemented. These resources allowed participants to watch via webinar at several locations throughout northern and central Minnesota, and made it available to be viewed on a home computer. Surveys and other research tools allowed NW RSDP to gain valuable information on this program's progress and impact on our area.

I probably first learned about the Local Foods College (LFC) from an advertisement in our local paper two years ago. We homeschool our children and it seemed like a good educational opportunity for our boys to go through this program. The first year you had to go to one of a number of interconnected locations to hear the lectures. The lecture would be at one campus, and everyone could see the lecturer and participate regardless of which location they were at. One class, though, occurred entirely online due to bad weather, since people just couldn't make it to the sites that night. That online class was sort of an experiment, and the last two LFCs have mostly been online.

So because of the LFC, my boys have gained experience in agriculture, marketing, and salesmanship. It has given them a number of opportunities to learn skills that are very useful in life.

We have participated in LFC the last three springs now, though not as much this spring. The first year they really promoted high tunnels, which are unheated greenhouses. Because we homeschool and wanted practical skills for our kids, the high tunnel idea really grabbed our attention. Two years ago, Joseph was 20 years old and Tim was 17 years old. They then built a 20

ft. x 60 ft. high tunnel. They found the plans and largely did this project on their own. They wouldn't have done it if they hadn't learned about it in the LFC. That first year they sold the vegetables that they produced in the high tunnel to the local grocery store in Halstad and also at three farmers' markets.



Photo 1: The 46.3 oz. tomato

They've produced vegetables in the high tunnel and garden area for two summers now. One Thursday the first year they brought in a huge tomato. I said, "We need to weigh this!" It weighed 46.5 oz. - almost 3 lbs.! I told the boys that the newspapers would want to see this huge tomato but Tim said they didn't have time since they had to get ready for the farmers market. I told him this was something you make time for. It's marketing. I called three newspapers and that huge tomato made it on the front page of two of them. So because of the LFC my boys have gained experience in agriculture, marketing, and salesmanship. It has given them a number of opportunities to learn skills that are very useful in life.

Also because of LFC, my wife feels I have gotten more involved in our garden. Before, much of the gardening was done by the rest of the family. I'm now getting more exercise and the garden has produced more because of the addition of the high tunnel and the expanded garden area. We now have at least three to four times more garden as we did before. Plus the boys are renting four acres, an old farmstead, from the watershed district. They put potatoes, garlic, and squash out there last year but didn't really use all of the space. They now have an older 10 horsepower tractor with a 38 inch tiller from craigslist so that they can do more with it than they did last year. So here at our place we have between a quarter and a half acre of land that we have for producing fruits and vegetables - including the high tunnel. But we also have that old farmstead for producing more food.

One thing that my boys have done is to grow different types of vegetables - some look like your typical vegetable but others are unusual. That huge tomato that made it into the newspapers is a yellow tomato called Persimmon. It has the acid of a red tomato. Before we did LFC we experimented with different varieties too. One of our favorites is Garden Peach, a fuzzy yellow tomato with a red blush. These unusual varieties are of interest in the community. A popular product at the grocery store has been pint-sized containers full of a pretty mix of red, yellow, orange, and chocolate-colored cherry tomatoes. While all of this is small-scale now, it could be something larger in the future. We'll have to see what the boys do with it.

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BCFS: Designed to Feed Members and the Community

By Josh Larson, SHIP Staff – Project Partner

Bemidji Community Food Shelf (BCFS) Project

NW RSDP was supportive in engaging the Food Shelf staff, board, clients and supporters in a design process considering the use of the larger facility that was home to the Bemidji Community Food Shelf. This design phase addressed the priorities for an on-site community garden. The design workshops in Bemidji was heavily supported by the community and supporters of the food shelf. Design material explore options, concepts and models for composting, water harvesting, container gardening and engaging community members.

I was involved in the initial conversations with Jack and Bill (Bemidji Community Food Shelf). I knew that they had moved to a new location which had more land and were thinking about starting a garden so I asked Jack and Bill to meet with me to explain more about what they were thinking. They explained that they wanted to grow food to support the food shelf. They said that it is always a challenge providing food for people but that challenge has been increasing because of the increased need for their support. They also wanted to provide an opportunity for their clients to help produce the food that they needed and had ideas about selling extra produce to help support the food shelf.



Photo 1: BCFS Design Workshop

Jack and Bill had so many ideas; it occurred to me that offering a small mini-grant to start the garden was probably not the best option. I thought that I should talk with Linda Kingery to find out how we (Statewide

Health Improvement Program and NWRSDP) could support this project in a more impactful way. After Linda became involved we visited the location and got a tour of their space and Linda suggested that we seek the expertise of a design team at the University of MN. Linda explained that the team would be able to take all of the ideas and potential opportunities and develop an approach to making this project a reality. It was a wonderful first step and exactly what this project needed.

This project helped me understand that supporting projects with inherent motivation for sustainability can be more successful than projects blessed solely with financial sustainability.

The most significant aspect of this project when I was involved was the decision to use a design team from the U of M. They did a wonderful job gathering input and creating different stages of development for the program with budgets tied to each stage/project. It gave the group direction and a vision that everyone could see. It also made the project manageable...it would have been very easy to get discouraged because there is so much opportunity that will take a lot of money and work to finish the entire design. However, designing the project with smaller projects built in made it easier to stay focused and positive about the overall project.

In my world there is so much talk about sustainability...it seems to me that nothing is sustainable without sustained dedication from individuals (and sustained financial support) or profits. We have helped create gardens, farmers markets, and have supported many other projects. This project has very dedicated individuals but the major significance or difference is that instead of focusing on how to sustain this project, we focused on a project that we hoped would help sustain something greater...the food shelf.

When we decided to support this project it was the first time that we had supported something with this thought so clearly in mind and I believe that is the most significant thing we could have done. This project will succeed because it has dedicated people and a great plan, but more importantly the Bemidji Community Food Shelf will succeed because they had the vision to see that they had to help support themselves with this food production project.



Photo 2: Bemidji Community Food Shelf Project

This project helped me understand that supporting projects with inherent motivation for sustainability can be more successful than projects blessed solely with financial sustainability.

This is a great project and it wouldn't have happened without many partners; one of them being the NWRSDP and the expertise and resources that Linda Kingery provides. Thank you!

Creating Deep Relationships Lies in the Roots

By Chuck and Barbara Schulstad, Farmers Market Mentors & Participants

Promoting Farmers Markets Project

In 2011 students in an integrated marketing communication class at U of M Crookston were involved in a service-learning project to help farmers markets in Northwest Minnesota. Research results identified target markets and their characteristics, including the demographics and psychographics. Recommendations were made ranging from sales promotions to reaching consumers through print, radio and other media. The markets and member vendors collaborated in seeking assistance in market promotion. MN Grown was also involved in the development of a regional label. A custom cover on the MN Grown Directory promotional material was created to enhance marketing efforts. NW RSDP and the Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP) selected and implemented promotional support on issues with high priorities. Market vendors act as market mentors to assist other vendors with their Farmers Market efforts.

Our farmers market connection starts in 2006. Barb and I were quite newly retired from our careers as elementary school educators, having spent nearly 40 years in the Fargo, ND Public Schools. We had retired to our Schulstad family century farm in 2003 and were actively involved with gardening and managing a U-pick raspberry patch. Berry pickers would often notice our garden next to the patch and ask if we had any produce for sale. At that time we had not considered raising produce in salable quantities, but the idea began to take shape. In 2006, the University of Minnesota's Master Gardener class was offered during the summer in Thief River Falls, so we decided it was time to learn even more about how to raise farm and garden fresh crops.



Photo 1: Chuck with U of M High Tunnel Raspberry Trials at our Farm

Not only has [belonging to the Farmers Market project] brought growth to our own skills of being growers, but it has brought the University of Minnesota right into our farm yard.

It was during these series of wonderful classes that we were introduced to the concept of using a greenhouse type structure to extend the growing season for vegetable crops. They are called "high tunnels" or "hoop houses." We got excited about the possibility of having ripe tomatoes, among other things, in early July when folks were here picking raspberries, so the next summer we erected our first high tunnel, completing it in the fall of 2006. The next season we applied our new skills of raising produce crops in the high tunnel and everything we had been taught about them came true! However, we had underestimated the volume of tomatoes and produce that could be raised in the tunnels and by mid-July we had more produce than we knew what to do with.

Our close neighbors were instrumental in organizing and setting up the Mentor Farmer Market and when we saw the ad in the paper calling for customers and vendors, we thought this might work for us. Well, work it

did. We have been vendors since 2007 and have now become involved with the administration of the Mentor Market as well. We currently have about 17 vendors, a wonderfully accessible corner of the Mentor Park for our market locale and a seemingly appreciative and



Photo 2: Barbara at our Vendor Stand at the MFM

enthusiastic consumer base.

Belonging to the Farmers Market has had a major impact on our lives! Not only has it brought growth to our own skills of being growers, but has brought the University of Minnesota right into our farm yard.

We have been honored to be selected to supervise two new University-sponsored high tunnels in which small fruit and large fruit trees have been planted in experimental settings. This continues to be a grower's delight. However, perhaps the most exciting thing that has happened involves the customers at the market. It has been really joyful to see people enjoying their shopping at the market as they find fresh fruit and produce, homemade breads / pastries / bagels / baking, handmade jewelry / crafts / artwork, fresh local honey, quilts, creative clothing, fresh eggs and much more.

I heard it said, soon after we had started our market venture, that a good farmers market will not only have

excellent items, but will expend time and energy on developing relationships with their customers. Barb and I have certainly found that to be true. We have found ourselves learning names, establishing friendships, and developing interests in who shops the market, and thus finding out what they want in a good farmers market. It is enjoyable to meet and greet these friends now where ever we might see them.



Photo 3: U of M Field Day at the Tunnels on our Farm.

The relationship opportunities extend also to our fellow vendors. By working together to make the market better, we have found ourselves feeling like we are members of a larger family, concerned about and caring for each other. Interests deepen in each other and this tends to transmit to an overall sense of well-being in the market in general. So, the Farmers Market has added another level of interest to our lives by allowing us to pursue our hobby of gardening and turn it into a benefit to the community as well as an additional source of income for us in retirement. But, most of all it has placed us in an ever widening circle of contacts with, and enjoyment of, our fellow human beings.

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Supporting Community Growth by Pushing Tech Boundaries

By Alison Link, Project Tech Support

Local Foods College Project

The Local Food College started in January of 2012 in collaboration with the Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP). Participants learned from practitioners, educators, and those involved in the growing movement to build resilient local foods systems. Participants chose their level of participation and viewing location. Some of the topics include: Soil Quality and Fertility; Specialty Products: Asparagus, Garlic, Wild Foods; Harvester Handbook; Tree Fruit and Berries in High Tunnels. NW RSDP also gained support from e-learning in Extension and the use of Moodle and Qualtrics was also implemented. These resources allowed participants to watch via webinar at several locations throughout northern and central Minnesota, and made it available to be viewed on a home computer. Surveys and other research tools allowed NW RSDP to gain valuable information on this program's progress and impact on our area.

As part of this year's Local Foods College (LFC) project, Linda submitted an e-learning proposal for in-kind support from the University of Minnesota Extension. This is my first year in Extension and this project was part of the first round of projects under my belt in this role supporting academic technology for Extension. Linda was great about collaborating with the team and doing the project management while I helped them connect the technical dots. For example, my role was to help the group conceive of what technical tools they could use, try out the tools, see how they fit, and empower the group to use these tools in the future for

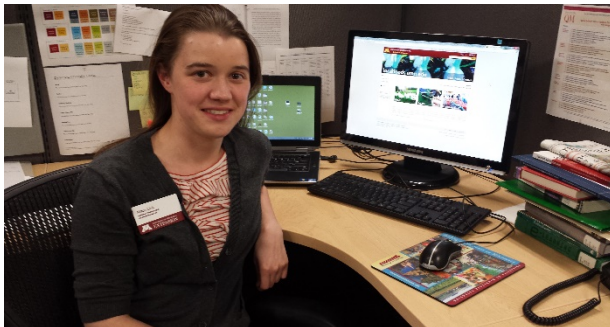


Photo 1: Alison Link

future colleges.

Because my role has been as internal support rather than as a participant, my story is more of a hidden one - behind the scenes. To take a step back, the University provides a set of centrally-supported technology for use by the University community - so in this case the Local Foods College has access to it. The LFC has taken a very novel way of using this technology - for example we

ended up using a new survey tool to get at audience analysis and LFC was one of the first groups to use this tool. I can now bring their experience using the survey tool to other groups internally across Extension.

...the LFC Group has a very large community, and it has forced us – in the U's tech world – to push the envelope in trying out new tools.

Another example is that the LFC group moved to a University Moodle site for hosting discussions and to provide more interactivity for participants before and after each session. What is interesting about the LFC moving to this Moodle platform is that no one else that I know of has used it in this way before - Moodle is typically used for academic year courses or courses with more bounded enrollment requirements. But this year LFC's registration got very big and Linda, from previous experience exploring open online courses, liked the idea of having two different ways for people to engage in the course content. Those who wanted to explore and be more engaged could, while others who didn't want to be so engaged could just observe.

As far as I know, the U's tech community had not seen these different levels of engagement and it was interesting to find a way to figure out how to use Moodle. As the tech liaison, I do my best to bring user needs for the system to the U's system maintainers and

we ran into some interesting hurdles. For example, in order to allow people to click into Moodle as an observer, we had to allow anonymous access for those participants. The LFC needed this flexibility with this platform so that people could sign up and engage in the courses the way that they wanted to. As far as I can tell, LFC is the only group to use Moodle in this bigger way.

In my meetings with people who support the platform, the LFC was a completely different beast to them, which was a good thing. For example, they were thinking about eventually getting rid of the anonymous access capability. But I was able to tell them that I have a group using it and was able to show the importance of this function internally and make sure we preserve it moving forward. Also, because I had interesting examples of emerging ways to use this technology, I was able to go back to different places in the University and tell them that my groups had certain needs moving forward. So when the U began making updates to Moodle for the fall, I made sure we had this conversation around anonymous access and casual observing. I was able to test the updated version and make sure it worked the way we expected it to work and now this function is built into Moodle and is hopefully established for the foreseeable future. The LFC has provided an interesting challenge in the U's tech space - it has been eye-opening to discover how groups want to use the technology in this innovative way. Other people in the University have looked at the LFC site, toured it and seen how its setup is specific for this style of outreach.

This story is significant for me because the LFC group has a very strong community, and it has forced us – in the U's tech world – to push the envelope in trying out new tools. This year registration for the LFC was so large that there was a concern that so many people would not fit on the existing webinar platform. So we tried out a new platform, although in the end we had enough attrition that we were able to use the old platform. I've taken these stories of pushing our technical limits to colleagues in the tech world and could report back on both successes and snags encountered.

It is very clear that the LFC is a big and growing community whose use of these technical tools is very important to how the group reaches out and engages with the community. I've been really glad to see how

bold they have been in supporting these new technologies to reach their expanding audience, even with the usual growing pains involved. Importantly, this means that any lesson learned from this project, I can take back to the University and demonstrate the need to keep pushing ourselves technically. I think groups like RSDP really push the envelope more than other groups or traditional departments at the University - they tend to be the ones to work in these innovative spaces to reach their audience.

I do proudly tell my technical colleagues this LFC story - even though sometimes it is about scrambling to figure things out. I even have a colleague in the College of Food, Agricultural, and Natural Resource Science who saw the LFC site and has followed up with me to ask about how it worked and what LFC wants to continue to do with it. The LFC site has caused some buzz in providing a sense of how their model could work for other groups.

On a personal note, if had I not been pulled in for tech support on this project, I don't know that I would have found out about local foods. But I got very excited about the LFC's community and outreach, and it was something that my sister is already very involved in. I told her about it and she signed up for it from out in Ohio—something that I recognize was only possible because the LFC took place online! It was something that I was proud to be involved in because my sister is very engaged in this community and it was something we could share.

Another result of my involvement in this project is that I found out about a local farm that sells maple syrup – Sapsucker Farms. I had never heard of them before they became a participant of LFC, but the woman who runs the farm posted a short introduction on our video discussion board on the LFC Moodle site, so I looked them up and found their Twitter account and blog. Now I'm planning to buy gifts from them for friends and family out of state! Lastly, I didn't know about this beforehand, but last year there was a group of about 10 people who would meet to watch the webinars and it turns out I live very close to their meeting location in North Minneapolis. I'm hoping they do it again this year so that I can participate.

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Paddling with a Purpose and Making Watershed Connections

By Wayne Goeken, IWI Special Projects Coordinator – Project Partner

River Explorers Project

NW RSDP understands the need to connect youth to the natural world around them; therefore, it has supported the River Explorers program. This program, coordinated by the International Water Institute (IWI), provides equipment and training to allow more river outings by River Watch teams and community participants. The program is designed to connect youth and communities to local waterways; document and share riverine conditions with resource managers; promote inquiry, learning, and further involvement in local watersheds; encourage physical activity; and instill a sense of place for local residents and promote tourism through river excursion activities.

I was involved in the initial development of the River Explorers activity as part of a broader River Watch citizen water quality monitoring program funded by the MN Legislative Clean Water Legacy Fund in 2012-2013. Due to the interest shown by our high school River Watch teams and local resource managers in the River Explorers activity of engaging students in kayaking their local rivers to better understand and document conditions that affect water quality there was interest in expanding the program. I approached the NW Regional Sustainable Development Partnership with a proposal to assist in expanding the program as part of their natural resource efforts to get kids outdoors and connected to the natural world and promote rivers as assets to the tourism base of the region. The project was funded and I

was also providing opportunities for non-River Watch youth audiences (4-H, science camps) and adults to become familiar with their local waters via kayak paddling experiences.

...the River Explorers activity is going to make a huge difference in students connecting not only to their local reach of river, but to their upstream and downstream neighbors as we scout and share information on river reaches that can be paddled.



Photo 1: Grygla River Watch team kayaking Thief River--student showing instructor map on iPad of team's location.

The River Explorers program is our most recent activity to engage students in making connections to their local watershed and to the Red River Basin at large. I consider the River Explorers program as still being in its formative stages as we refine our protocols for safely conducting the river trips, how we coordinate logistics for implementation, and how to share information gathered from the trips. I believe at the early stages of the program, the most significant change has been on my colleagues who are helping to organize and implement the program. There is a great deal of excitement and energy by our staff and partners to get all our schools out to connect to their local rivers. We've already seen that the students have a blast while out paddling—as most have not kayaked before, much less explored their “backyard” by water.

am now assisting with implementation of getting not only River Watch students out to explore their local

I also feel that the River Explorers activity is going to make a huge difference in students connecting not only to their local reach of river, but to their upstream and downstream neighbors as we scout and share information on river reaches that can be paddled. They will get a better sense of place of where their local watershed fits into the big picture—how they are connected to the big picture—the health of Lake Winnipeg. I believe this will be the long-range impact of the River Explorers program—a better understanding of the connections between cause and effect—that what is happening on the land impacts our rivers and what we all can be doing to foster sustainable futures for our watersheds.

I am beginning my 20th year of working with the River Watch program in the Red River Basin. The program has already made a difference in our knowledge and understanding of our rivers and watersheds. Some of the students that have participated have gone on to careers in watershed science related fields. I believe involvement in River Explorers will make an impression with participants that will last a lifetime for a far greater number of students as they will make direct connections between what they see on their paddling trips with the water quality data that they have been collecting. Providing students exposure to kayaking, a fun and inexpensive recreational pursuit that engages them in a healthy outdoor activity, also will help them realize that there are excellent recreational opportunities close to home—and the importance and opportunity we all have to help improve and protect our watersheds. I've been paddling rivers for nearly twice that long. It has been discouraging at times to see that many students were not

“getting” the connections between water quality and



Photo 2: Bagley River Watch team kayaking Clearwater River--team paddling through some wild rice beds along river.

enjoyment of our river resources.

For most, being involved in River Watch is an extracurricular activity with no additional connection to their local river. As I've been out with the initial schools on kayak outings it has been gratifying to see students become more interested in what actually is going on in and along our rivers. It has become easier and more fun to connect with students in the field and also back in the classroom when we review their data as we can recall what we discovered on the river and better understand the WHY behind their data findings. Lastly, River Explorers has our staff and colleagues super excited about the possibilities and really looking forward to getting kids out on the water, and this wouldn't be possible if not for the many partners who have supported River Watch through the years and continually strive to find innovative ways to support watershed education for our next generation of watershed stewards.

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Leveraging Resources

By Peter Phaiah, U of M Crookston Administrator – Project Partner

Farm-to-College Project

Students from the U of M Crookston participated in the SELF Sustain event at U of M Morris in 2011. In 2012 a Food Advisory Board was initiated on the U of M Crookston campus. Student, Abby Wemimo conducted qualitative research on “The Importance of Sustainability to the U of M Crookston student body” (2012/2013). Student interns visited the Cornucopia Farm at the U of M Twin Cities campus in 2012. A Real Food Challenge was started to help establish a quantitative rubric for U of M Crookston dining services in 2013.

I work with the University Extension program in trying to get a campus garden project up and running so that the food it would produce can be used in our residential food service program. We are in the process of nailing down the property, but we've secured the grants and the resources from the University have been great. We are also trying to get local farmers to supply their produce and sell locally. University of Minnesota Extension folks like Linda Kingery (RSDP member) and Deb Zack have been really helpful in this process in helping us to make connections. So far we have had 5 garden dinner parties, where local people from the community, such as Linda and local farmers, participate.

I'm familiar with this concept of a farm-to-college model because a lot of other universities are using it in some form or other. I'm originally from New England and I'm familiar with the farm to college program in Vermont. Our University uses Sodexo as our food service management company. This company works with farm to college programs at other universities (for example in Pittsburg) and they have really been pushing us to pursue this model and are willing to work with us regarding all of the food safety requirements. Importantly, anything we produce on campus, they can purchase and serve in our cafeterias. So we are really trying to get this garden going.

We are already doing some small things. For example, we are taking our cooking oil grease and turn it into biodiesel fuel. We take our food slop and turn it into composting. Once the campus garden is up and running, we should producing enough quality compost for that project, as well as for any future high tunnels or greenhouse expansions.

My role at the University is Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management, but I also oversee our food services. One of my tasks is to try and connect the practical experience that students can get from the garden with sustainability and the reduction of our footprint. So not only can we get good quality produce on the tables in our cafeterias, but engage our students in the process. They learn hands-on management, marketing, production, and sustainability skills. This is an enrichment opportunity that enhances their student experience. This is one of the main reasons why I'm involved.

While we all have our own separate missions and vision, our continual partnerships and collaborations make us collectively stronger. Together we can be the “to-go-to” resource place here in NW Minnesota.

I think the story here is that NW Minnesota and U of M Crookston are real fortunate to have the U of M Extension and the Northwest Research and Outreach Center on our campus. This provides a great foundation for us to leverage our knowledge, expertise and resources. Specifically, the U of M Extension works very closely with rural development and the NW RSDP. We collaborate to share facilities, staff, interns, joint funding and hosting regional conferences on our campus. The U of M Extension and NW RSDP are great partners and we will be looking to them for considerable input once we get the green light on the

campus garden. I think we'll be a better partner in this farm to college program.

While we all have our own separate missions and vision, our continual partnerships and collaborations make us collectively stronger. Together we can be the "go-to" resource place here in NW Minnesota. I believe there is an expectation from our various constituents that we be good stewards of our resource and work collaboratively.

Part of this story is that, as a University, we have students who are our future. They see agencies that are working together, collaborating, sharing facilities and expertise. We should be good role models in our regional actions, support and services. We believe this reinforces their educational experience by getting them engaged in practical community service, internships, and through service learning projects. These out of the classroom or co-curricular experience also help them to network which come in handy for jobs, references and possible future professional connections. So once again, I'm very supportive of these programs where UMC and its partners work collaboratively and engage our students in the process.

On more of a personal note, since I have been involved in our Farm to College efforts, my wife and I have decided that we too can do something about sustainability at home. My wife has worms for

composting and we have been doubling the size of our garden these past 2 years. We have consciously changed the way we do things around the house, whether that is through recycling or composting, and we've gotten our son involved. Even in our neighborhood other neighbors have been inquiring on what and how we are doing things. We have seen a few more gardens pop up in the last year or so. Most of our close neighbors have 1 acre of land and some people are growing crops while others have animals or greenhouses. It is a great image in the community when everyone is doing something about sustainability.

One of the biggest thrills my wife gets from gardening is working with the children in a garden plot at our local elementary school. Many of the school kids have never been in a garden. They get a real kick to actively plant, care for, harvest and then eat the fresh produce.

So this movement towards healthy, sustainable living is community-wide movement, with the farm-to-college project being just one component.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my story!

Peter

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Tree Cookies, Mud Pies, and Social Capital

By Eric Castle, U of M Crookston Faculty – Project Partner

Connecting Children and Nature Project

In an effort to encourage young children to reconnect with nature the U of M Crookston hosted the Connecting Children and Nature Conference in 2010. The conference was funded by a grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and was sponsored by USFWS, Rydell Wildlife Refuge, RSDP, Extension Environmental Science Education, U of M Crookston, NW Statewide Health Improvement Program Cluster, Northwest Regional Development Commission, and U of M Regional Extension - Crookston. With funding from these groups, NW RSDP was able to award 25 mini-grants to community groups interested in connecting children and nature. Support to design a Natural Play Space in Warren, Crookston, and Fertile was also achieved from 2011-2012. NW RSDP conducted research on the public health benefits natural play spaces can bring to communities like these.

I first became involved in the project after the Connecting Children and Nature conference held here on the U of M Crookston campus. At that point I was invited to be involved in the project. The change that I found to be most significant is the development of a process that allows a community to develop natural place spaces and allows them to implement them in a collaborative way that is easy for people to implement. It was something that was very cost effective for smaller towns in terms of what traditional parks and playgrounds cost. We are able to make it accessible for towns that don't have large budgets to pay for parks. The whole process has been very beneficial for me.

I feel that community connections and building trust between community members, organizations, government offices, and public institutions is really important because research shows that those connections are not as strong as they once were, this social capital is declining in our country as a whole. It's important to rebuild these relationships and work to make connections between these entities. And that's what this project allowed us to do. For example, working with the Northwest Regional Sustainable Development Partnership, the Polk County Health offices and others in various counties, and U of M Crookston campus were able to come together to form great relationships and networks. And we are able to reach out to communities to help them. So this is valuable to me, we are able to use the expertise and knowledge from various entities and come together and work on a project. Because of these

connections we can bring resources and advice to others. I remember a comment made by a community member who stated that this was a fantastic use of resources, all of it together was something extremely valuable and a tangible benefit that he could see. These organizations were providing community members with the opportunity to get involved and engaged in the process themselves.

I remember a comment made by a community member, who stated that this [project] was a fantastic use of resources – all of it together was something extremely valuable and a tangible benefit that he could see.

I knew that nature play is really important to me personally and in my profession. I really didn't know how the community would respond to a project like this. We wanted children to have a heavy hand in what happened in the space so I was not sure how the community would respond to this type of esthetic. I have been pleasantly surprised at how receptive the community has been to them. I find that kids have been utilizing the space and they have enjoyed them very much. I am pleased that it has been well received.

Creating these natural play places and creating awareness of the disconnection that children are having with nature is important. Children should have the opportunity to have free play out in nature. They should have a sense of ownership as they play and leave their thumb print on the things they create. Kids need a space that is unstructured with no adults saying this is what you should do or how you should do it. Creating places like this allows kids to use their imagination and they are able to play freely. Having a place like this not only allows children to play at will, but also helps us create relationships among community members. It also allows me to do research on this topic of connecting children and nature and the added benefits obtained by it. I can ask questions that have not been asked yet and work to find the answers. I focus on the benefits of

nature play that we are enabling in these spaces. Another crucial part of this is that it also allows me to hire students to do the planning and design work. This opportunity is a tremendous learning experience for them. It gives them real world experience, they implement the things they learned in class and they are able to work with a client. I know that these experiences have been beneficial for them.

Lastly, I feel that my relationships with partners has deepened and strengthened. I have expanded my connections with people and it has spurred more projects. Doing these projects has raised the awareness about what the University has to offer and how we can all work together on a common goal, which in turn raises our social capital.

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Garden Takes Root to Improve Health

By Jason Bergstrand, PartnerSHIP 4 Health Manager – Project Partner

Community and School Gardens Project

In 2012 NW RSDP awarded 11 mini-grants to NW area community and school garden projects. Four free workshops were held across Northwest Minnesota focusing on making community and school gardens a success. The workshops were developed by the American Community Garden Association (ACGA). Participants in the workshops learned how to develop community building and organizational skills to make their gardens beneficial. Mini-Grants for 15 projects were also awarded in 2013 in collaboration with Growing Communities workshops.

RSDP provided a community mini grant to Lake Region Takes Root during the spring of 2013. The funds were used to purchase much needed start-up equipment and supplies such as shovels, hula hoes, pitch fork and dozens of tomato cages. The purpose of the garden is to provide nutrient-dense whole foods to families in need throughout Otter Tail County in an effort to improve health, community and self- efficacy. In our first year we were able to grow 1600 lbs. of food that served 300 families. Foods were provided to Women Infant Children's (WIC) program, Fergus Falls Food Shelf, Matthew House and A Place to Belong.

Noelle Harden, UMN Extension Educator, also made several trips to the garden to learn more about our mission and find ways to better connect us to other expertise and resources. We also participated in the workshop which is always a great opportunity to network, and learn new methods and from others' successes.

Many young families from the WIC program participated every Monday in the planting, maintaining and harvesting of the garden. It was wonderful to see them be an active participant in this process. They brought their children to the garden to also learn and play. On WIC voucher pick-up day, a county extension agent periodically provided taste testing recipes using the fresh garden produce. Children and their parents could taste and learn new ways of preparing healthy whole foods for their families.

One participant stated "I am so grateful for the opportunity that the community garden has provided my

family. We've learned how to create a small raised garden bed for ourselves and my children are learning to appreciate fresh vegetables more than I could have ever imaged."

I am involved in this project because it engages the greater community to be a part of the solution to a specific, identified community need.

Another HUGE piece to the success of this project is all of the volunteers that come faithfully each week to serve. We have many individual and group volunteers throughout the year. They help with routine garden tasks and special infrastructure projects to keep the garden well maintained and productive. It always warms your heart when others get inspired and catch the flame within to want to help others in need.

A policy development that came out of this project is that Fergus Falls updated its ordinance on composting. The community garden wanted to practice environmentally sound practices but quickly realized that the current ordinance did not allow for large-scale composting. We brought the issue before the city council. After learning about the mission of the community garden, the city council wanted to do its part in supporting this effort and one of those ways was to adopt an improved composting ordinance that did a better job of considering the needs of residents and allowed

composting to be scaled-up depending on the size of the property.

These stories are important because it shows how decision makers can provide real leadership in their community that ultimately benefits its citizens. It is also important because we know the efforts of the many community volunteers are impacting some of our most vulnerable populations by increasing access to healthy whole foods and providing new learning opportunities. This will in turn strengthen the resolve of the community and ultimately improve community health.

I am involved in a project like this because it engages the greater community to be a part of the solution to a specific, identified community need. What's exciting is that this project is making a meaningful difference in people's lives and can serve as a model to be replicated elsewhere. When more people have better access to whole foods it leads to lifelong healthy eating habits and improved health of its residents. To see the volunteers step up and develop the passion for serving others only motivates me to want to do more.

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Appendix E – Stories Not Nominated

Unfortunately, this evaluation technique requires the organization to narrow down the ultimate list of stories. It was an extremely difficult process to narrow down the stories list down to 10 Nominated stories.

RSDP greatly appreciates everyone’s participation and plans on using ALL stories for learning and evaluation, whether or not they were nominated.

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Story Title: **Can One Person Make a Difference?**

Project: **Baudette Depot**

Individual / Role: **Joanne Kellner/Exhibits Director – Grants – Services – Research**

Confidentiality Status: **Approval for use of name and publication**

Individual's Location: **Baudette, MN**

Date of Story Collection: **March 18, 2014**

A chance encounter can change your life – and maybe your community. That is what happened to me causing my involvement with the Baudette Depot. It was December, 2006, and I was finishing up a few shopping tasks at the local Ben Franklin store in Baudette. I saw a friend and stopped to say hello. The friend asked me if I was very busy. I should have taken that as an indication that I was about to be asked to do something, but I didn't and so said, "No, I wasn't very busy at the moment as I was between projects." The friend said the Depot project really needs help and she wondered if I was able and/or willing to help. So I naively said yes without even knowing what all was going (or not) on. I had lived in the community for 13 years and was vaguely aware of people involved in the Depot restoration, but had not paid much attention as I had been busy with a variety of other projects.

My current involvement is as exhibit projects director, grant writing to secure funding to create exhibits, working with consultants in design, creation, and fabrication services, and doing research and writing for support materials for the exhibits. I think the most significant change that resulted from the Baudette Depot Design Project was the change to the organization with which I worked – the Depot Preservation Alliance (DPA).

When I was asked to lend a hand and attended my first board meeting (January, 2007), it was apparent that the then board members, although very well meaning in their intentions to "save the depot," were lacking in leadership, vision, and planning. They had no re-use plan or funding. In the ten years since the DPA was incorporated as a 5013c non-profit in 1997, they had completed the listing on the National Register of Historic Places (with the assistance of the MN Historical Society), they had completed some basic weatherization, some utility work, and they were collaborating with the City of Baudette on a housing project with some initial funding to restore the second floor apartment – which had been started, but was lacking the necessary funding to complete. Their perspective was that some mysterious "angel" was going to come along and "give" them the money needed to restore the depot, which was the same perspective they had had for ten years since organizing in 1997!

About the time of my involvement, a local community member who was "sort-of" involved with the Depot Project told me to talk to Linda Kingery. I pursued this contact, and thanks to the tons of help from Linda, submitted a grant request through the Northwest RSDP to secure the assistance of the University of Minnesota Center for Urban and Regional Affairs to assist the DPA in developing a re-use plan. That grant request was approved and with the assistance of community input as to community needs, a re-use plan was developed to create a "mixed-use facility" at the Baudette Depot incorporating housing (second floor), small business rental in the former customs area, and arts and cultural activities in the former general lobby, freight room, and ticketmaster office spaces.

The re-use plan provided direction for the DPA Board and the basis of subsequent grant applications for the restoration funding. The process has also helped the DPA Board to develop better management practices.

This story demonstrates that sometimes a catalyst is needed to make things come together and/or move forward. That catalyst is sometimes an event, but it can also be a person. The Baudette Depot in the two

years since the renovation (2011) has hosted a number of arts and culture events including concerts, art shows, railroad related shows, a series of arts classes for kids plus hosting meetings and special events. Guests to the Depot praise the restoration work accomplished by Anderson and Hammack, prime contractors from Superior, WI. The small business space and the second floor apartment are both rented.

Community members see the Depot as the leading provider of arts and culture events and opportunities in the community. Although the exhibits at the Depot are somewhat historic in nature, the goal of the DPA is to present these exhibits as a complement to, and not in competition, with the local county historical museum.

Why is this important? Given that Baudette's location is at least 100 miles from any other significant community which might offer arts and cultural opportunities, the isolation of the community is an extremely important factor. The community also has a higher than average age as compared to the statewide average, and in addition, the median income in Lake of the Woods (LOW) County is lower than the statewide average. Both factors can limit the abilities of the residents to avail themselves of arts and cultural opportunities. Additionally, Baudette and the Lake of the Woods County area are prime tourist markets. However, they have focused for years primarily on the "fishing." The addition of an arts and cultural center offers an addition to the area's attractions which should boost the economic impacts of tourism in the area as other populations find the LOW area interesting to visit.

Through my involvement in this project (through the re-use study), I learned that "preservation" may be a worthy goal, but planning for what is next, i.e., Plan A, B, and C, is crucial as is leadership development. I doubt that the project would have been able to move forward – at least not in this timeline - without the NW RSDP partnership with UMN/CURA.

A few years ago, someone asked me why I had undertaken assistance with this project. Perhaps being a farmer's kid, I knew that risks have to be undertaken, seeds have to be planted, work has to be done – all before the harvest will happen. It was a challenge and ended up encompassing far more work than I could have ever envisioned.

Story Title: **Serving the Hungry in Beltrami County**
Project: **Bemidji Community Food Shelf**
Individual / Role: **Jack Judkins / Retired Manager - Grant Writer**
Confidentiality Status: **Approval for use of name and publication**
Individual's Location: **Bemidji, MN**
Date of Story Collection: **March 28, 2014**

I first became involved as a donor of the Bemidji Community Food Shelf (BCFS). When I retired from being a teacher, I noticed an ad in the paper for a part-time manager position with the food shelf. When they hired me in September 2011, they made it clear that the primary challenge I'd face was to get out the small storefront of that time to a larger facility that would allow the organization to accomplish its goals. I just retired in March (2014) but I'll continue with the food shelf as a grant writer and co-manager of the community garden project. So I still have a lot of connection here.

While the food shelf has recently begun the garden project in partnership with NW RSDP, we won't be able to see the impact of this project until the summer. The infrastructure like the deer fence and raised beds, as well as plantings will be more noticeable in the spring. Engagement with the community will be more apparent in the summer. So the most significant change I want to talk about for the Food Shelf was the finding of a larger facility.

We had no idea what we were looking for when we got started. We were very fortunate to find a facility that was very well-suited to our needs and included 1.5 acres of property (which will be used in the garden project). Virtually every stakeholder has been affected profoundly by this move - we were able to change our service model from a family coming and waiting for their food to a small grocery store setting. People have carts and essentially "shop" for their items on their list. Volunteers converse with the families and get to know them and it has created a much more personal, dignified way to get food.

The larger setting has also allowed us to store all our food on-site and we are now able to re-pack bulk foods into smaller quantities for distribution. The number of volunteers has more than doubled and we anticipate more volunteers getting involved in the garden project. The amount of attention from the community has increased significantly. We also have expanded our ability to take advantage of accepting food that before we had to turn away due to lack of storage space. For example, we now get food from the Twin Cities. I honestly can't think of a way that we haven't benefited from moving to our new location and I don't think we are done benefiting. Another non-profit organization that is located on the same industrial block as us might add another 2-3 acres to the garden project. It is just remarkable.

For me the biggest thing is that we are actually able to accomplish what the community has asked of us. Without this change I'm not sure we could have survived - we would not have been able to provide quality service to our customers or to operate as efficiently as we do now.

Another benefit is that we are able to collaborate with other non-profit organizations which serve the same people. The soup kitchen serves three meals per week to many of the people who are served at the food shelf. We have been able to help the soup kitchen find, store and ship food. There is a new homeless shelter and we are helping them learn where to buy and how to transport food at no charge to them. The BCFS move has had a synergy effect on the non-profit community here in Bemidji and I think it is only going to grow as time goes by.

It has been a wonderful experience - I have more compassion for people and families struggling to

survive. In our society there are stereotypes of people who struggle that are not fair. At the food shelf we see every type of person from every walk of life. A lot of people in the community have prejudiced views of these people as asking for handouts and trying to get whatever they can - this is far from the truth. A typical family comes to us 3-4 times a year, or just once per year or once in their lifetime.

It is gratifying for me to get to know them and their stories. Working here has used many of my skillsets I had as a teacher, where I learned to get along with just about anyone and appreciate people's strengths and developed mutual respect regardless of one's life situation. It has also helped me to appreciate how important volunteering is in our society, especially as the role of the government keeps shrinking. Literally thousands of people give their time and talent - we only have 5 paid staff and last year 300-400 volunteers donated 10-12,000 hours.

Lastly, it has been very gratifying to work with the University of Minnesota. I am an alumna of the University and we (at the food shelf) were all very impressed with those who have been working with us through the Extension program and the garden project. It would not have been possible without the support of people like Linda Kingery and Terry Nennich. There are many people involved from the University and I'm sure they will continue to be involved.

Story Title: **The Gardening Experience can Snowball into Something Much Greater**

Project: **Community and School Garden**

Individual / Role: **Tim Lutz / Superintendent of Kelliher School**

Confidentiality Status: **Approval for use of name and publication**

Individual's Location: **Kelliher, MN**

Date of Story Collection: **April 1, 2014**

Two years ago we started the Community garden through a SHIP grant. We were able to acquire \$500 in our first year and applied that to garden supplies such as seeds, implements, plants and to pay for someone to till the garden. It is a fairly large space and we are at the start of our 3rd year. We are trying to involve the students as much as possible in the planning, planting, and harvesting of the garden produce. We plant produce that will mature in the fall (potatoes, squash, tomatoes etc.) so that we can use them in school lunches. During summer school, we have students hoe and pick weeds, identify plants and just get students involved in the maintenance of the garden.

I enjoy assisting in the year-round operation of the garden, especially during the summer school months. Every successful project needs a champion, and I am a champion for the school garden. I try to motivate our students to get out and hoe the garden and ask them if they can identify plants. It is amazing how many students don't know the difference between a weed and a garden plant. But, for me, the real impact of the school garden boils down to encouraging more of our students to eat better. They have come to learn that fresh fruit and vegetables are not only good for you, but they taste good too if prepared well or fresh out of the garden. Before we had a garden, I would notice a lot of kids not eating their vegetables. With this garden we are intentionally trying to teach youngsters about the importance of nutrition - we even have a dietitian. We are noticing that students now eat their vegetables more often than throwing them away, and because of this, I believe our students are becoming healthier.

We've also had another initiative grow out of our garden project. We pursued the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable grant, and this is our 2nd year where, everyday, we provide our elementary students with a mid-afternoon snack of either a fresh fruit or fresh vegetable such as strawberries, pineapple or broccoli. The Fresh Fruit and Vegetable grant is a direct offshoot of the garden project because it made us more aware of how much students enjoy healthy snacks. These healthy snacks have more or less replaced the unhealthy snacks that students often bring to school.

Research shows that students who participate in caring for a school garden tend to have fewer discipline issues in school. Indeed, we have noticed that when our students spend only a few minutes taking care of the garden, they come back to the classroom more centered and relaxed. Their behavior has become better. So, this project really has snowballed into something so much more than just a garden. Because of our past successes, we are anxious to get out there this spring and to expand our garden by implementing new ideas. For example, this year we are trying out straw bales, which are like mini-greenhouses because internal composting creates its own heat. Thus, we extend our growing season by planting sooner and harvesting later. We hope to use straw bales for planting a lot of tuber plants like carrots, potatoes, and beets. So this is just another example of one more project coming out of this garden experience.

This story is significant to me because I've always been health conscious, and it has been a personal goal of mine to help our students become healthier. We have an 85% poverty rate in our student population, and I've seen this correlate with a high obesity rate. One of the steps to combat poor diet and obesity is

to teach students about healthy choices, including exercise and diet. I want our students to realize that food is not merely a value-added, immediate gratification experience with a bag of treats from the convenience store. Not only do kids save money, but they now focus on the healthy food options that are offered to them free of charge at school. As an administrator and educator, I appreciate how healthy eating results in better attention spans, more energy and overall better learning for students. So again, it boils down to a better overall educational experience through more physical activity and better diet.

Also, as an administrator, the budget piece of this story is amazing. For about the past 20 years, our hot lunch program has been more than \$30,000 in the red every year. This year we made history by completely turning our finances around, all in one year! We are now in the black, and a significant part of this turnaround has been due to the renovations we've made to our menus, teaching students to only take what they plan to eat, and providing training to our kitchen staff to provide better menu cycles. We've added a salad and fruit bar, which students use first to choose fresh fruit and vegetables before they are served their hot lunch food. As a result of this change, they get to choose what fruit or vegetables they want to eat rather than being served a canned, heated vegetable that they may not find as appetizing.

When students have greater control over their food choices, they tend to eat better and waste less food. By feeding students healthier menus and allowing them to have choice, we throw away less and are therefore able to come out in the black. We have even noticed our garbage bill has been reduced by about 10 percent! It is all really a rewarding and a win-win situation. All of these changes have grown out of a greater awareness of healthy foods that has originated from the SHIP grant, the garden experience and the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable grant. It has all been snowballing from one thing to another.

Personally, I would say that this success also applies to me. Two years ago my family and I went on a vacation. Immediately after our trip, I weighed myself only to discover that I weighed more than I'd ever weighed before. Since becoming a superintendent, I had slipped away from being as fit and active as I had once been. On April 1st 2012, I remember committing to going back to my roots of a healthy lifestyle and following the tenets of healthy living that I preached to students. I realized that I have to walk the talk. The whole process of the school garden, revamping our menus and focusing on healthy lifestyles became a conscious health decision for me as well. I am now healthier than I've ever been in my life.

It is really rewarding to see how something you think of as a minor garden project can snowball into a major and intentional change agent in an institution, organization or group of individuals. We are noticing our students becoming slimmer and in better shape, and, at the same time, they are learning better because they are eating better. Such results are very exciting to see.

Story Title: **Community Comes Together for a Community Garden Project**

Project: **Community and School Garden**

Individual / Role: **Reid Jensrud / Community Garden Founder & President**

Confidentiality Status: **Approval for use of name and publication**

Individual's Location: **Fertile, MN**

Date of Story Collection: **March 31, 2014**

About 4 years ago I got really involved in gardening, just at home. My yard wasn't that big, so this garden took up a lot of space. I thought it would be nice to have an area where anyone could come garden and the deer and rabbits and critters would be kept away (they like to come in and eat your produce). So I thought, why doesn't Fertile have a community garden? I know bigger towns like Fargo have them, so I decided to talk to some people and figure out a way to start a community garden.

I am the President and I found 4 other people to be on our board to help make decisions about our bylaws and how the project would be run. The project started out really slow. I first had to talk to people about where to locate the garden. I originally thought it could be inside the city where it is more protected and park-like. But there were no open lots and no one wanted to sell their lots. So I found a guy who owns a large farm nearby and he had a lot of CRP (Conservation Reserve Program) land. He asked the CRP Board if he could donate a large piece of this land to the community garden and received permission. We officially started last year, which is when we broke ground on the garden: we cut out the trees and sifted up the ground with a tractor, brought in some peat dirt and mixed it with the sandy dirt that is currently there. We now have pretty good ground.

I went around the community to see if we could get donations. For example, the Fertile-Beltrami Community Fund said they would donate a 3200 ft fence. Two greenhouses in Fertile signed up to promote our business with their business. So if someone comes to us to rent a plot, they get a gift certificate to one of those greenhouses, as well as a coupon from the local hardware store for seed. All of our apple trees were donated and other local farmers have donated close to 50 hours of equipment time. I also went to the city EDA (Economic Development Authority) Board to ask for a small loan to cover liability insurance on the garden and they approved me for a low-interest loan. So our engagement with the community has been very good and it has helped a lot - I could not have put up the fence all by myself. If I just ask a local business, they are more than happy to get involved.

This entire project was just an idea that I had because I like to garden and I know there are a lot of gardeners in Fertile. The town's nickname was the flower city, so I know people like to do this. I knew I didn't have a big yard, I knew others didn't either, and we were all struggling with the animal problem. That's why I got this project rolling - I figured it could be done. I'm not out to make money. I just wanted to create a park-like atmosphere for the community. That is my goal - to create a place where the community can come together. When I was younger I remember the community was very tight knit, but now I look at our community and we don't do things together as a community. I want to see this more. So for example, apple trees and grapes are things that anyone can come and pick. Say, if the apple trees take off, I'd like to have some sort of harvest party out here. It could be in the evening with bobbing for apples and just something fun for the community to do together.

Because of this project I've had to deal with being in charge. I've never really been in charge of anything beyond myself. Now I'm in charge of other things and that is a change I see in myself. I now deal with trying to get people lined up to come and help with getting the garden set up. I've had to put together a meeting and organize the community and it takes a bit of knowledge - you can't just swing these things.

Story Title: **Being Intentional**

Project: **Children and Nature**

Individual / Role: **Gina Gunderson, Little Villagers Childcare Director**

Confidentiality Status: **Approval for use of name and publication**

Individuals Location: **Crookston, MN**

Date of Story Collection: **March 19, 2014**

Providing children outdoor experiences is a very intentional aspect of what our childcare center does. As most of us know children enjoy being outside when given the opportunity. Exploring nature and going on an adventure is something children thrive on. Some kids are here for about ten hours, so we make an effort to get them outside for at least 2 hours each day. Research shows that they learn more and it provides them with developmental skills, thinking skills and cognitive skills needed as they prepare to enter school. These are all important, especially as children grow. Having the resources to give children the opportunities they might not have otherwise is crucial for us. We wanted them to experience nature first-hand. By receiving the grant money we've been able to provide them with those opportunities.

Purchasing age appropriate outdoor toys and equipment like a butterfly lab, butterfly nets, spider web frame, bug jars, sleds, snow shovels, and a bird book have all been instrumental in helping us provide new experiences to our children. Our situation is unique because our childcare center is housed in a healthcare facility along with the adjoining assisted living apartments. We have incorporated intergenerational aspects to the things we do. As children reminisce and talk about their projects, seniors watch them close by and they enjoy listening to their antics. We give children a variety of experiences simultaneously. Our core values are fostered when we provide them with lessons that teach them to respect and love nature. Teaching them about being good stewards and instilling in them the passion and importance of nature at an early age will hopefully create in them a lifelong love for the outdoors.

We are confident that the experiences our children have outdoors were enhanced due to the toys and equipment purchased with the grant funds. Our kids love telling their parents what they learned and what they have seen each day. We are able to see first-hand their curiosity and energy spike when it comes to spending time outside. The excitement in their faces as we take out the insect collecting jars. Hearing the ooh's and ah's is what makes this job so rewarding. We hear conversations amongst the children at play and they make references to the outdoor experiences they have had. It is clear that the more children are engaged in outdoor play, among the natural beauty of the world, they will carry it into adulthood.

Story Title: Tree Cookies & Mud Pies: Engaging and Collaborating for Population Health

Project: Connecting Children and Nature

Individual / Role: Kirsten Fagerlund

Confidentiality Status: Approval for name use and publication

Individuals Location: Crookston, MN

Date of Story Collection: April 1, 2014

Connecting children to nature and the development of local natural play spaces have brought many partners together with local public health. Polk County Public Health's Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP), Northwest Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships and faculty and students from the University of Minnesota - Crookston and Twin Cities in collaboration with the City of Crookston facilitated the initial community design process following a regional children in nature workshop. Local support in the communities of Crookston, Fosston and Fertile was also provided along with the Otto Bremer Foundation, University of Minnesota and United Way of Crookston. Through purposeful engagement of the involved communities and vast partnerships we have seen huge successes.

The purpose of SHIP is to improve the health of all Minnesotans and thereby decrease health care costs through increased physical activity, healthier eating, and less use and exposure to commercial tobacco products. SHIP succeeds by encouraging and supporting healthy living and addressing health disparities through community engagement, local decision-making and sustainable, evidence-based strategies.

While certainly it is up to individuals to be in charge of their own lives, when it comes to health it is important that people have healthy choices available. Changing the environment that people have access to (for example, building a natural play space) makes the healthy choice of walking to and playing at a natural play space, easier. Purposeful connection of natural play spaces to walking and biking paths, increases access and use resulting in increased physical activity, leading to improved health there by lowering health care costs and improving the quality of life. By actively engaging the community in the planning process and discussions, we see increased participation and use, but also personal investment in a process to change their communities' culture of health.

No one can resist telling stories of their own childhood. By engaging community members of all ages in a discussion about nature based play, we have build community partnerships that otherwise would not have formed. Whether it's sharing stories of fishing on the Red Lake River between a retiree and a college student; a discussion about mud pies and mud cookies by a local mayor with community children; or how the community work team can make a bench out of a salvaged electrical pole and downed trees; the stories of the community resonate. Natural Play Space work brings together all ages and generations and it helps everyone connect to their local public health agency in a way that might be new to them.

The public health system that keeps our communities healthy and safe is evolving. We are not the Polk County nursing service of 40 years ago. Primary prevention is a major focus. We know that for the first time in centuries, the current generation of children in America may have shorter life expectancies than their parents and that two out of every three Minnesotans are overweight or obese, increasing risks for chronic illnesses thereby leading to increasing health care costs. Working with natural play spaces is primary prevention at work and helps our communities connect primary prevention to their local public health department. Public health is becoming the cog of the wheel, connecting our communities for healthier lives.

Story Title: **When The Light Bulb Goes Off!**

Project: **Connecting Children and Nature**

Individual / Role: **Laura Bell /**

Confidentiality Status: **Approval for use of name and publication**

Individuals Location: **Crookston, MN**

Date of Story Collection: **April 1, 2014**

I have always been involved with environmental education and interpretation and I really enjoy talking to children about nature. I became more involved with the project after the Connecting Children and Nature conference. After having been involved in that, everything evolved and I have received a lot of responsiveness from community members and others all around. We have a support system here and we have started to make the connections. People are becoming more aware of the need to connect children and nature. It's been really fun to see how many people are interested and excited about having someone come talk to them about nature. I also find that building those bridges and connections is important, especially when you are trying new things. For me, I enjoy talking to people of all ages because we all need to learn about this. The most rewarding part of what I do is seeing the light bulb go off or seeing the spark be lit. Children can gain so much from just listening to a presentation about butterflies. They begin to see things in a different way and we hope that they take that and keep it with them for life-long enjoyment. Some groups don't get that support or engagement, so if we can give them that, it's something that I enjoy and treasure.

A large part of my work is done because I love the field I'm in. I do this because I have a passion for it and I hope to infect others with it. If I'm in a room with one hundred people and I only reach one person, I feel that I have done my job. It makes it worth it for me. Maybe that person needed to hear something and in turn that will spark their interest. I've had the tremendous opportunity to speak at different venues with kids of all ages. I find myself always looking for ways to improve and challenge myself on the presentations I give. I want to make things understandable for children because I know that they can understand, even at a young age.

Statistically we have seen that some kids only get about an average of 4-7 minutes of unstructured play each day. This is shocking to me! And I feel like this is something we need to work on. I see that there is some type of disconnect between children and nature and we have kids as young as four year of age who have televisions in their rooms. So I feel that we need to try and bridge that gap. Now, I know that technology can be useful and it's needed, but we want kids to know that there is a world around them that's totally alive. This is something very important to me.

Through this work I've been able to provide several presentational topics and I'm able to bring them a valuable message, one that they want to hear and is tailored to their liking. I have really enjoyed working with so many groups and I really hope that my work has impact. I feel that when you are passionate about something, you want to share that excitement with everyone. Ultimately, I have learned that our children will be the ones carrying the torch when they get older, so we need to instill this passion early in life.

Story Title: **Fresh Start Farmers Market has Freakish Success**

Project: **Farmers Market**

Individual / Role: **Lynda Annoreno / Farmers Market Founder - Market Manager**

Confidentiality Status: **Approval for use of name and publication**

Individual's Location: **Baudette, MN**

Date of Story Collection: **March 31, 2014**

The Fresh Start Farmers Market seed was planted in 2012. I was born and raised in Chicago IL. Then after living decades in Phoenix, AZ I had an opportunity to be transplanted, and then found myself living at, of all places, Baudette, Minnesota. The only county in the state without a stop light. We only have 1500 people in our community. I was used to the privilege of having a variety of stores to shop at in the various cities I've lived in. So when I came here to Baudette it was quite the culture shock. When I first got here I treated myself as a guest – without family ties in MN, I thought I'd sit back and see what the lay of the land was. So I looked at what people were spending money on, what types of venues they gathered at, who was prominent in the community and who perhaps needed support - more of the underserved. I looked at everything and said, we need a farmers market! So the market was formed. A gathering place that would focus on the physical, social, and mental health of the community.

When I first started, I wanted to offer something to the community that would be a healthy addition and compliment the community. Because we have just one grocery store, I felt it was important to also have a resource for locally grown food. I also noticed a desire for the people to get together and have coffee and socialize. So that is the social and physical end of the farmers market - now I had to see how it could address mental health. From my observations of the senior community, I saw that they didn't leave their houses on the weekend, unless it was for church, because there was nowhere to go. No reason to leave the comforts of home - no destination - no activity. So, how to include the seniors? Create a destination location. A Farmers market!

As a result of the market, the economic impact on our community has been outstanding. The first year our market brought in nearly a quarter of a million dollars in sales. When I attended a Chamber of Commerce meeting after about a month of our market being in operation, people were snarling at me (jokingly). They asked me, "Do you know what you started? We have had to put in extra staff during market hours because we couldn't handle the traffic!" I replied with "Oh darn". (I had focused on 3 things. Money potentially being spent in the community was not one of them). "That's a bonus I didn't plan for, you're welcome"!

There has definitely been a positive economic impact on our community. People have been saying how they have been to the "mall" - the market being the mall! We have such a variety of vendors - we first started with just 17 vendors and now, going into our 3rd year, we have a list of nearly 50 vendors! Some vendors are coming from as far south as Bemidji (2 hrs drive), others from as far east as International Falls and as far west as Thief River Falls.

Our market on average sells 3,500 loaves of bread during a season. When corn became available from local growers we sold 2,000 ears of corn in 1 hour. We sell 100's of jars of jam. People come from all over - as far as I am aware, we have regular shoppers from as far North as Winnipeg, Canada. Our first year, there were 4 ladies who frequented the market from Winnipeg. Now at the end of last season a caravan was established by these ladies resulting in 3 car loads of people .Because we are a tourist town, and fishing is our primary industry, we have a lot of resorts and tourists coming from all over the United States. It has been reported by our artisans that they ship their products (mosaics, wood sculptures, iron works etc.) all over the country.

It has only been through the good nature, participation and support of the people of Northern Minnesota and Southern Canada that we have been so "freakishly" successful.

The vendors are happy, the customers are happy, and I never in my dreams thought this could have become as successful as it is. The market has become a destination for socializing – you will find the picnic tables are always full with people visiting with friends or taking a shopping break.

Comments that have come to me from vendors have been:

"Lynda, I am so glad I have this farmers market because now I can afford to buy food and all my medicine this winter."

"Lynda, I have grandchildren and they've never been able to play sports because it is so expensive. But because of this market two of my grandsons can play hockey."

"Lynda, my children wanted me to downsize my craft supplies. They thought I was too old to continue crafting without a way to sell it. NOW the kids are fetching more supplies for me. Thank you for helping this 83 year old to prove them wrong!"

This story is a sign of not only the significant economic impact on community business, but impact on the individual. People have more of a purpose - especially within the senior community - with setting up their tables, selling their wares, seeing and socializing with people, and putting that smile back on their faces. I also see an impact on the younger community. For our towns National Honor Society and Rotary Impact kids who so generously volunteer...

"The Farmers market is the place to be hanging out on a Saturday"

We don't have big industry here - we are mostly a fishing resort town. What has been at the forefront of my mind is that not all the vendors are vending for extra money, but vending for necessary money. This market has provided an avenue for the vendors to grow their businesses and incomes.

The farmers market has definitely had a positive impact on my physical, social and mental health. Sometimes it is hard to become a part of a small town. I have benefited immensely from the social gathering, the people I've met, and all I have learned. (I've even learned how to set up a tent!) It has been an overwhelming heartwarming experience. "Build it and they will come"? Yes! This market is proof of that. It's what people want and want to continue to patronize.

As I mentioned in the beginning I was a stranger here. Now I am part of a generous, caring, supportive community. A place I will always call home! (This, my friends is a bonus I hadn't planned on receiving.) Thank you!

Story Title: **Fergus Falls Farmers Market - A Valuable Community Asset**

Project: **Farmers Market**

Individual / Role: **Lynn Brand / Co-Manager**

Confidentiality Status: **Approval for use of name and publication**

Individual's Location: **Fergus Falls, MN**

Date of Story Collection: **April 3, 2014**

This is our third season of providing a Farmers Market in our community of 15,000 residents. We became involved last year with the NW RSDP as a result of a program brought to our community by our County Public Health Department. As a result of this excellent program, we were introduced to invaluable resources and networking with other people doing what we were doing. Our program grew last season from 15 vendors to 45 vendors thanks to all the help we received because of our involvement with the NW RSDP project.

Our partners in making this project succeed are the local Garden Club, SHIP, OT Public Health, City of Fergus Falls and the OT County Historical Museum. We have a Board of Directors helping make decisions and my friend, Diane Johnson, is the co-manager of our operation. Our Farmers Market operates every Saturday morning 9 am - 1 pm June through October on the Museum lawn facing the main highway through our town.

The reaction to our Farmers Market last season has been unbelievable....our customers thank us constantly for making it possible to purchase locally grown and produced products weekly from their neighbors and other fellow residents. The information we have received from the NW RSDP has allowed us to become more aware of the rules and regulations governing the farmers markets and allowed us to learn how to be efficient, effective and successful. Our customers tell us often that they are eating more local produce, trying new vegetables and loving the change our farmers market has caused in their lives.

We continue to educate our customers about the produce and health advantages of locally produced fruit and vegetables. Our farmers market has become a financial success for our vendors, a positive addition improving the diets of our shoppers, another asset of economic development in our community, and last but certainly not least, a wonderfully fun social event every Saturday morning! There is something very satisfying about providing a farmers market in our community and having it so well received. Other farmers market managers in our NW RSDP project also talk about their projects with equal enthusiasm and personal growth as a result of being involved.

The exciting change to our Farmers Market for the coming season is that we have added a Wednesday afternoon market from 3 to 6:30 on the grounds of our hospital/clinic complex. We were invited to become part of their wellness program so we have added a new partner.....Lake Region Healthcare! We believe this will be another great successful asset in our community and the feedback so far has been overwhelmingly positive. We also plan to accept EBT SNAP cards and debit/credit cards this season, expanding the benefits of shopping at our Farmers Market even more!

**Story Title: Increasing Local Food Procurement through University of Minnesota
Contract Provisions and Practices**

Project: Farm to College

Individual / Role: Anonymous

Confidentiality Status: No Name/Approval for use in publication

Individuals Location: Minneapolis, MN

Date of Story Collection: April 2, 2014

I became involved with RSDP during my second year of law school. As part of my Environmental Sustainability – Land Use Clinic, I was required to complete a project related to sustainable practices. For my project, I collaborated with RSDP and Linda Kingery on a project that examined how contract language between the University of Minnesota and its Dining Services provider, Sodexo, could be utilized to support the purchase of more locally grown food products.

I ended the project by providing RSDP with contact information of dining services leadership from model universities who had already begun supporting locally sourced food. I also collected some best practices tips from those eco-friendly dining services. I drafted model contract language for purchase agreements that would encourage the purchase of more locally sourced food. Linda and I also met with a systems mapping expert, who assisted us by mapping out the local food procurement process. When my project came to an end, students from the undergraduate program were beginning their own efforts to bring more locally grown food products to the schools.

Even though I was not involved in the actual Farm to College project, other than doing research that related to it, I certainly commend the efforts of those who are involved. Dining services at a university the size of the University of Minnesota have a huge impact on the environment. By supporting the purchase of locally grown foods, the University would significantly lower its negative impact and footprint.

I hope that my project made a difference by providing a springboard for further efforts in local food procurement by the University. Also, I hope it provided some perspective of the necessary steps on the legal side of things that need to be taken in order to increase local food procurement at the University. The process of researching for the project was enlightening because it not only gave me a better understanding of local food procurement as a whole, but also allowed me to research model institutions and discuss model practices. It was also nice to develop a relationship with RSDP and learn more about the great services the organization provides. Through the project, I gained a better understanding of the huge impact dining services and not buying more food locally has on the environment. It was very encouraging to learn that other students were going to continue the efforts of increasing local food procurement at the University.

Story Title: **Food Safety a Concern for Local Growers**

Project: **Local Foods College**

Individual / Role: **Kim Swanson / Local Grower and Farmers Market Vendor**

Confidentiality Status: **Approval for use of name and publication**

Individual's Location: **Thief River Falls, MN**

Date of Story Collection: **March 26, 2014**

I've participated in the Local Foods College (LFC) since it started 3 years ago. The topics are of interest to me because of my job, my business and my interests. I work at the county extension office and that's how I learned of this project. The first 2 years I was a participant and would sometimes host the seminars face-to-face when the educator couldn't be there. This year I was a participant and one of the speakers. There are 3 couples involved in Cabin View Gardens. We have 2 high tunnels and gardens. We sell our produce on the farm, at the local farmers market and we have started a small amount of CSA's. With 3 couples we don't have to hire any outside help.

I always pick up so much information from these sessions, so it is very hard to list just one major change. I had to think about this one.

I think food safety at the farmers market will be one of our major changes. We try to be creative at the local farmers markets. We want people to try the produce and do give out samples. We also create a salsa kit providing all of the ingredients uncut/unprocessed in a white lunch bag for the customer to make a bowl of fresh salsa. We want to do this safely and within the rules to protect our customers. As such, the "Food Safety for Farmers Markets" session offered in the LFC was very beneficial to us.

The rules are changing quickly and we want to stay on top of them. As farmers markets are gaining in popularity we need to be more cautious to make sure we do samples/kits/activities safely. Our biggest change this coming year will be to provide a handwashing station at our stand at the farmers market and on the farm. The farmers market is also providing a handwashing station this year. Since we do samples we thought it would be best to have our own. We are also working on a safety plan for our farm and a binder that we can bring to the farmers market containing our certifications and also recipes if someone wants to see our ingredients. We want our customers to trust that we are taking every precaution to keep them as safe as possible. The hardest part of all this is finding the time.

The local foods college draws information not only from the experts but from people in the field who do this daily. It gives us hands on techniques that we can use in our farm operations - plus we know that it is research-based and reliable information. This eliminates everyone making the same mistake and allows us to share what works well and learn from each other.

I am also a master gardener so I love to share the information I learn with others. It keeps me up-to-date on issues that are of concern for the people in our area. I enjoy getting to know more people and the Local Foods College gives me a wide base of resources to access.

Story Title: **Putting Lessons Into Practice**

Project: **Local Foods College**

Individual / Role: **Molly Zins / Regional Executive Director - Central RSDP**

Confidentiality Status: **Approval for use of name and publication**

Individual's Location: **Brainerd, MN**

Date of Story Collection: **April 2, 2014**

I first became involved with the Local Foods College (LFC) by invitation from Linda Kingery shortly after I started in my position with RSDP (summer of 2012). Linda briefed me on the first year of the project and helped me to understand its scope. Essentially the NW and Central regions had collaborated on the project that first year in order to host the viewing sites and coordinate our colleagues interested in the project. We talked about putting together a 2nd year planning team for the LFC sessions and I was able to shadow Linda in her expertise in coordinating the LFC sessions. We also had a VISTA local food specialist interested in the project and I was able to help her get involved. This was a great introduction to both RSDP and the LFC project.

After the season wrapped up we started to debrief as a team on how the sessions went and we put in place a plan for post-evaluation. We wanted to learn from participants if they were able to apply the information they learned in LFC, and if so, how it was working. We also wanted to use the opportunity to gather feedback from participants to find out what they would want to see for the 3rd year of the LFC. We used this feedback for planning the 2014 LFC that happened this past January through March.

This year my involvement has been primarily in communicating with the hosted viewing sites and coordinating the evaluations. LFC evolved from a formal, hosted-at-central-sites model to a webinar format. Participants are now able to view the webinars from home, but we still have some communities that want to host a central site for viewing. I communicate information to these particular groups as well as manage the session evaluations.

The most significant change from my standpoint comes from the post-series evaluation that we conducted last summer. In this evaluative effort, we asked if participants were putting any of the information learned into practice. Amazingly, 82% of our survey respondents have been putting into practice skills learned from LFC sessions. In reality, everyone has contributed towards this change: the planning team was responsible for identifying the most appropriate sessions, the session presenters were responsible for delivering the sessions and relaying information that they felt was relevant, and of course the participants themselves. They are the most significant players in all of this - they didn't simply just close their notebooks and put them away to collect dust on their bookshelves, but instead very quickly applied the learning in their growing season that kicked off just a month or so after the last session wrapped up. So everyone played a role in this story of change.

This story really speaks to the purpose of the Local Foods College, which is to deliver useful and applicable information to people who are growing food. Our evaluation findings demonstrate that the majority of those who responded to the survey are in fact using the information learned. In the survey the respondents provided specific examples of how they are using this new knowledge, of which run the whole gamut of the LFC sessions from that year. The examples that they shared really showed how LFC information is not only useful and applicable, but also beneficial to their growing practices.

Professionally, this has been a great project for me to be involved in, for a number of reasons. I was able

to get involved shortly after starting in my current position at RSDP. It was a great introduction to one of RSDP's premiere projects and offerings. Also the opportunity to work with Linda right of the bat was a wonderful experience throughout, and it provided me with the chance to get to know and work with the RSDP team on a project. I was also exposed to other University colleagues invested both in this project and as partners of RSDP. Lastly, by working with the planning team and overseeing the coordination of the sessions, I was able to understand how RSDP and other colleagues practice what we call "in reach." I learned how to reach out to other University partners who might be a perfect fit for a topic, I learned how to collaborate with them and how to inform them of our work. Not only is RSDP's work useful to project participants, but it is also useful to our University partners' work. So being a part of this project was a big benefit for me professionally in helping me understand how I work in this position with RSDP.

Finally, I really appreciate the fact that this particular project is one of the projects under evaluation in this pilot methodology. I think it is a very appropriate project for this type of evaluation. For all practical purposes I think the LFC will continue for more seasons because it is really well received and overall seems to be a positive experience for those participants that we hear from. So if we continue with this project and if we continue to collect evaluation data from participants and the planning team, I anticipate that the change we are seeing as a result of the LFC will be more and more significant over time. Hence, if there is an opportunity for this evaluation to continue after the 4th or 5th season, I think this project could provide for very interesting long-term impact.

Story Title: **Creating Awareness of Local Foods**

Project: **Local Foods College**

Individual / Role: **Ross Wagner / Aitkin County Economic Development Officer**

Confidentiality Status: **Approval for use of name and publication**

Individual's Location: **Aitkin, MN**

Date of Story Collection: **April 2, 2014**

My job relates to economic development for the county, and so for several years we've been trying to get more local foods into our restaurants and institutions. If the local farmer can make a few extra dollars, it is both good for the economy and good for the restaurants because they get more customers by offering local food. So personally I saw this project, the Local Foods College, as an economic benefit to our community.

Interestingly, there used to be a lot of agriculture in Aitkin County. However, because of our soil and climate, land has become more valuable for recreational purposes as opposed to farming. A lot of people have property that was producing food but is now fallow. My strategy is to ask ourselves, what can we do? How can we get more production out of our land with the ultimate goal of bringing more money into our community? I see the local foods movement as one of the things people can actually do - whether they are using high tunnels or founding a farmers market. We have this land and local foods is a very popular thing, so maybe we can tap into this movement.

Of course, my viewpoint goes beyond just the LFC. I have been pursuing this idea of selling or providing local foods for the past 7-8 years. I saw this project as one way to bring information and awareness to people who might be interested in producing and selling more local food. Some of the topics in the LFC are particularly relevant, such as: high tunnels technology and USDA food safety requirements if selling produce to restaurants. So I felt that the LFC sessions fit both our farmers' needs as well as our organization's overall goal of increasing local food production.

I hadn't heard of it the first 2 years that it was running. Someone that I work with in the local foods community brought it to my attention. I realized that this project is offering a lot of the same ideas that we, at the county, were talking about doing. We were looking into putting on a workshop on some of the same topics as LFC, so we felt it was best not to reinvent the wheel and it would be good to have the backing and endorsement of the University Extension to give our ideas more credence.

Many of the changes coming out of the LFC are subtle because this past January through March was the first year that we've been involved. We had a group of people who attended and got a lot of good information, but at this point it is hard to tell if we reached our goal of participants taking this information learned and using it in their growing practices. I can't quite put my finger on the exact piece of change, but I was glad we were able to offer the LFC sessions and that they were available. We are planting seeds - we won't know if anything comes of it until a little bit further down the road, maybe a year from now. While we can't make the local restaurants offer local food plates, we can create the demand for local foods through awareness.

What I've seen is a change in attitudes towards local food and a growing concern and trend to pursue local products, whether that is in food or wood or other things. So the LFC was just one piece of a big puzzle to create more awareness. The ship is already sailing, and the LFC put a little bit more wind in the "local foods" sails.

Story Title: **Advances in Produce Production and Health in NW Minnesota.**

Project: **Local Foods College**

Individual / Role: **Terrance Nennich / Organizer, Instructor**

Confidentiality Status: **Approval for use of name and publication**

Individual's Location: **Crookston, MN**

Date of Story Collection: **March 27, 2014**

[The Local Foods College Project is project funded by RSDP and touches on many different food themes ranging from fruits, vegetables, and high tunnel production. This particular story is specific to the high tunnel farming production project.]

I've done quite a bit of research with fruits and vegetables, season extension and high tunnels in the Northwest corner of the state, which does not have much of a season. Several years ago a group got together and decided that education was crucial, but that the distances that people would have to travel is crazy - the NW region is a very big area. So we needed to be able to educate people in a way that was feasible to get the information to them but also convenient for them. Hence, the Local Food College (LFC) was designed. The college has been in operation for 3 years now and every year we have more people signed up. The LFC has really helped to enhance our farmers' markets through a lot of education, but probably the most significant thing is being able to get information to people in a way that accommodates the varying distances and does not require a lot of traveling. This is especially important during the winter.

My role in the LFC is two-folds: I helped design the project together with a committee, which involves choosing education topics and research and development for the University. I also teach 1-2 classes per season in the Local Foods College. One of the topics covered in the LFC is called high tunnels technology, and this has impacted a lot of people. It started with no growers using the technology but now there are between 30-40 growers that are now able to supply produce to CSAs and farmers' markets because of high tunnels. This particular technology has enhanced our farmers' markets and allowed growers to expand to CSAs, schools and high-end restaurants.

High tunnels extend the growing season 4-8 weeks earlier in the spring and 2-8 weeks later in the fall, depending on the crops being grown. This is especially relevant to MN farmers because of the short growing season and the occasional frost early in the year. Several years ago we started a high tunnel research project and were able to move the research onto the farms so that growers get both the experience and can act as mentors. We entered into a working arrangement with a vegetable farmer up here who wanted to expand and he now has 3 research high tunnels on his farm.

I can see that this particular project is one of our big success stories for agriculture and horticulture in the NW district. We've had a lot of successful high tunnel projects and the project continues to this day. The high tunnel technology is very challenging and just a few years back no one was using it. Through this research and the interactions with farmers we've had more and more growers get involved and become mentors. We do summer tours, which get 60-100 people, a webinar, and smaller meetings throughout the NW district over the year. We also have conferences where growers get together and share their results. This is a fun group to be a part of and I feel good about this success.

I also see high tunnels as doing 2 things. First, they help the economic state of the growers in NW Minnesota. Not only does this economic impact help keep people on the farm, but it also is something

that the youth can get involved in. The technology does not require a lot of startup money and the profits are reasonable. Secondly, the project is also being driven by the local foods movement. I work a lot with Blue Cross Blue Shield and other health entities and health is a big thing. We know what is happening - many health problems are being attributed to poor eating habits that are spurred on by the lack of available healthy foods.

When we started out the concern was about producers making a profit, but now the biggest concern has been about health. I have so many friends, as well as myself, which have some type of health issue. Being able to eat healthy, chemical-free food is so important to one's health. Everything has really worked out for this project - in terms of the timing being right and people starting to realize that they have to change their eating habits.

As for this project's impact on myself, I was able to get involved with a lot of the growers, who are now personal friends, and I have been able to do a lot of collaboration with other colleagues from other states. I've traveled to talk about the high tunnel research we are doing here in Minnesota and the reverse is true too. We just had the statewide high tunnel conference last week and Cornell University participated. We all try to work together and see how we can transfer knowledge from other areas to the Minnesota context. This kind of technology is relatively new to the U.S. Much of my information came from France and other countries that look at food in terms of healthy living rather than in terms of profitability. I have met so many nice people from around the country and the world and being a part of this project has really enriched my life in many ways.

Story Title: **Not “Just a River”**

Project: **River Explorers**

Individual / Role: **Ashley Helgeson /**

Confidentiality Status: **Approval for use of name and publication**

Individuals Location: **Fisher, MN**

Date of Story Collection: **April 2, 2014**

I first became involved with River Explorers in 8th grade because my mother is a good friend of Laura Bell, Lab Services Coordinator at the U of M Crookston Campus. She is also really involved with the River Watch Program. Laura let me join River Explorers at a younger age. I was able to experience going along on sampling trips and was able to help during the summer months as well. I also got to help during the fall too.

While on a float trip I got to see the Red River Valley differently. River Explores has let me do things that not anybody gets the chance to do. While on the Red Lake River, I started to realize how poorly our river has been taken care of. You don't have to go very far to find trash and people 'mudding' along the river. But you also don't have to go very far to find deer drinking water, families of ducks, or a beaver paddling along. It made me start to think that we aren't the only ones that use the river. I think some people are almost clueless of the wildlife we have around here just because they don't see them in their backyards.

As a young child, spring was an exciting time of year. Not only was summer coming, but the river had washed up new trash. My dad would take us to the river banks and look for 'treasures'! Now when I look back on those memories, I start to wonder how much trash there really is in the river

I see myself as more of a plant-life kind of person. But being a part of the River Explores project has shown me more about river life, it's more than just water.

Story Title: **What River Watch Did For Me**

Project: **River Explorers**

Individual (list if consent to name on their story) / Role: **Marnie Peterson / Student**

Confidentiality Status: **Approval for use of name and publication**

Parental Consent: **Received from Shawna Peterson via email 4/4**

Individual's Location: **Stephen, MN**

Date of Story Collection: **April 1, 2014**

I became involved with River Explorers through my high school. Mr. Garry Kotts introduced me to the program. I participated in the program for grades 10-12 and am currently not involved in the program.

In grades 10-12, I participated in Stephen-Argyle Central's River Watch program. During these three years I helped to test rivers around the towns of Stephen and Argyle, including the Tamarac River. In the spring, I also participated in the River Watch Forum, an annual conference where regional teens share river data and attend nature-related breakout sessions on topics such as invasive species, good rivers for recreation, and conservation efforts.

I greatly enjoyed my time participating in the River Watch program. Once a month from April to October, Mr. Kotts, a few other students and I would go out to test the rivers. We would test things like the dissolved oxygen, visibility and the water level of the rivers.

We would always have a fun time learning about the quality of our rivers and joking around with each other. One aspect of River Watch that I found most exciting was that the data we collected would be used by the state. By helping to collect the data, I was a part of something much bigger than just a couple of high school kids recording statistics about a river.

The most significant change that I can think of is the change in my classmates and I. River Watch helped us to look past ourselves and see how we fit into the world. It helped us to discover the impact we could have on the world around us, and that lesson is something I have taken and applied to my everyday life in ways as simple as recycling and decreasing my use of electricity.

Story Title: Community Garden Workshops Strengthen Connections Between the University and the Communities We Serve.

Project: Community and School Garden Mini-Grants and Workshops

Individual /Role: Noelle Harden / Extension Educator - NW RSDP Local Foods Workgroup Member

Confidentiality Status: Approval for use of name and publication

Individual's Location: Vergas, MN

Date of Story Collection: March 27, 2014

I became involved with this project because I am a member of the NW RSDP local foods workgroup. Additionally, as an Extension Educator working to promote regional healthy food access, I was already somewhat involved with community and school gardens in the northwest. I had also attended a two-day training in January of 2013, along with two other Extension employees, to learn how to empower and organize community gardens. Together, the three of us taught four community garden workshops with the School and Community Garden Mini-grant recipients during the summer of 2013.

I can only speak from my own experience with this project, which has been as a workshop leader, not a participant. I would prefer not to guess as to what the impact of the project was on the communities that received mini-grants, but I can share how this project has impacted my work for Extension. In summary, this project has significantly changed my ability to effectively network in the region because I formed new relationships, strengthened existing ones, fostered connections between mini-grant recipients in different parts of the region, and gained invaluable leadership and teaching experience.

There is one example in particular that comes to mind. A young woman from the Thief River Falls area attended our first workshop. As she introduced herself, I was at first impressed at her educational background and community organizing experience. As she began describing the complexity of poverty as experienced in her work and life, I began to grow nervous, realizing that the content of our workshop might be a bit too simple for such a sophisticated group. Sure enough, the workshop content wasn't as rich as it perhaps could have been for the high quality group we had that evening, but it was our first workshop and we made adjustments for the other three. And thankfully, I have maintained a relationship with the young woman from Thief River Falls who continues to be a tremendous advocate for change in her community. Just this week in fact, we exchanged several ideas via email, which resulted in her drafting an Idea Brief application for the NW RSDP, in collaboration with a church in Thief River Falls and the Thief River Falls area food shelf, to establish a food network with a catalyst project of establishing a multi-site community food system that will serve low-income residents of the community.

This story is significant to me because I don't often get to connect with people like the woman from Thief River Falls during my work. I typically work with representatives of institutions (public health, schools, etc) rather than the broader community. Furthermore, Thief River Falls is in a part of the region where I have had a difficult time forming strong connections. I think this story is important because it shows how Extension can engage new partners, and how the deliberate cultivation of these partnerships can result in new projects, ideas, and collaborations.

This project not only changed my relationship with participants (as I have already described) but it also greatly changed my understanding of how community and school gardens increase access to healthy food, and provide many other benefits as well. I learned by hearing the stories shared by workshop participants, and through the process became a better listener, facilitator, and teacher.

Story Title: **Enhancing the cultural competency of undergraduate students at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities Campus.**

Project: **White Earth Academy of Math and Science**

Individual / Role: **Charlie Blinn / Professor**

Confidentiality Status: **Approval for use of name and publication**

Individual's Location: **St. Paul, MN**

Date of Story Collection: **March 17, 2014**

In 1998, I was part of a multiple day tour of the White Earth Reservation which took faculty from the University of Minnesota Twin Cities Campus to the Reservation on two buses. During the visit, faculty learned about the Reservation and issues where event planners thought that there might be opportunities for joint work between the Reservation and University faculty. The White Earth Reservation partners identified the high dropout rate among high school students as one of their greatest concerns. According to one of the teachers, American Indian students struggled in math and science as those topics were taught in a context that had little relevance to the students' lives. The tribal historian was a former teacher who taught in schools that served American Indian students. He noticed that the only times that his students were engaged in learning were the times that they were outdoors at an environmental learning center where they learned about nature by being in the environment where teaching was taking place. The educator challenged the University of Minnesota faculty to create an outdoor-based summer program that would teach students about math and science through the use of natural resources. The result of that challenge has since become known as the White Earth Academy of Math and Science.

I have been involved with the Math and Science program since its inception in 1999, primarily as an educator for youth. I annually co-instruct outdoor-based classes on two to four days in June during the forestry/wildlife week. I have also helped judge science fair projects and visited the Circle of Life School during the academic year to provide forestry information to students.

After having worked together for more than 10 years, the community of instructors during the forestry/wildlife week at White Earth is a pretty tight knit group. I soon came to know Doug McArthur, a Wildlife Biologist on the Reservation, because he has a very positive personality and perspective, is outgoing, and is a great collaborator. Doug is a graduate from the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities Campus.

I annually co-instruct ESPM 1011, Issues in the Environment, on the Twin Cities Campus of the University of Minnesota. The course provides an introductory survey of environmental issues to undergraduate students as it explores the connections between environmental sciences, policy, and management. In addition to exploring environmental resources (e.g., air, water, forests, wildlife), it also addresses many of the societal constructs which help drive the differing viewpoints about those environmental issues (e.g., ethics, policy, population, economics). Knowing that people also view the environment differently based on their cultural perspectives, Doug McArthur has annually lectured to the class about how people at White Earth view the environment. By addressing these societal constructs in tandem with the environmental issues, the hope is that students will be better able to solve complex issues.

Students in my co-instructed class would only be exposed to the dominant culture's perspectives on issues in the environment if Doug weren't willing to be a guest presenter. Through Doug's presentation, the hope is that they will see that cultural differences exist around issues, to understand why those

differences occur, and to respect those differences. Through that enhanced awareness, our College is hoping to build cross cultural competency. As we ask our students to work in groups to think about and to solve issues, being able to recognize that the ways in which we are different helps to drive our perspectives on those issues. By better understanding the context of those that we work with, it is hoped that students will be better equipped to work together to solve complex problems facing us in the world today.

While I don't have data which says that students now are able to view the world through an entirely different lens due to Doug's presentation and thus will do so through the remainder of their lives, I think that it is fair to say that an unexpected outcome of the summer program at White Earth is the development of this relationship between their wildlife biologist and a course on the Twin Cities Campus of the University of Minnesota where that biologist presents information to University students about a different worldview of natural resources. Without the summer program, that relationship never would have developed.

Also, the four co-instructors in the course felt that it is worthwhile continuing that relationship as Doug is the only non-University of Minnesota guest presenter in the course and one of only two presenters from outside of our co-instructor group (the other is the CFANS director of diversity and inclusion). As co-instructors, we felt that Doug did an excellent job presenting his information and noted that the students were actively engaged with a discussion of a wild rice case study that he facilitated. After Doug's most recent presentation, all of the co-instructors told Doug that he did a great job and that they learned a lot from it (two had never heard his presentation before).

Through my participation in the Math and Science program, I have been able to enhance my understanding about the perspective of White Earth members to and with the natural environment. But, having the opportunity to hear Doug describe it in my co-instructed class has given me a much better lens into their worldview.

Story Title: **A Youth's Quest for Knowledge**
Project: **White Earth Academy of Math and Science**
Individual /Role: **Doug McArthur / Instructor**
Confidentiality Status: **Can be used for publication**
Individual's Location: **White Earth, MN**
Date of Story Collection: **March 26, 2014**

The summer math and science program started by trying to encourage youth to be better students in math and science by showing them real world importance of those disciplines at a local level. We also encourage and teach the importance of historical Culture of the Ojibwe people and how deep down math and science was important to them too. I was one of the original presenters/teachers from the very inception of the White Earth Academy of Math and Science program.

The most important change was the realization that Reservation youth had very little knowledge about nature, the general environment around them, and traditional plants and animals. The major change that evolved from the program that started in year one and actually went for about the next few years. The program had the assumption that youth had been involved with what we thought was medial things like going fishing, cleaning fish, general tree identification (birch, maple, ash, etc.) bird identification, catching frogs, etc. We then found out that most have done those activities or know what they were, so changes to the presentations and classes needed to be addressed to make sure students experienced those activities at a beginner level.

It changed the entire makeup, goals and objectives of the program to make sure that students received activities at beginner levels and learned the things that we assumed most already knew. All in all the program gives students an awareness of nature and their surroundings, including the Cultural, scientific, and mathematical importance. Hopefully they come to understand that, in a school setting, those subjects are important to their development and growth in society.

This Math and Science program gives me a unique opportunity to teach youth about natural resources. More importantly I have the ability to show them animals and plants and insects that surround them that most of them never even know existed. We also show them as professionals in Natural Resources how fun and exciting the natural sciences can be.

My involvement changed my perception of youth dramatically. Growing up here and doing the numerous outdoor activities (such as catching frogs, watching birds, going fishing, hunting, etc.), I assumed most youth still did the same things. However, I found differently, most have done few if any of those things. Now, if even for short time I have the opportunity to teach and show the youth some of those things for the first time.

NW Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships: Most Significant Change Pilot

FINAL SELECTED STORIES

Compiled by Tatyana Venegas Swanson, RSDP Program Evaluation Graduate Assistant

Northwest
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Leadership Fostered by Evidence-Based Advocacy

By Abbey Wemimo, Former NW RSDP Intern & Researcher

Farm-to-College Project

Students from the U of M Crookston participated in the SELF Sustain event at U of M Morris in 2011. In 2012 a Food Advisory Board was initiated on the U of M Crookston campus. Student Abby Wemimo conducted qualitative research on “The Importance of Sustainability to the U of M Crookston student body” (2012/2013). Student interns visited the Cornucopia Farm at the U of M Twin Cities campus in 2012. A Real Food Challenge was started to help establish a quantitative rubric for U of M Crookston dining services in 2013.



Photo 1: Abbey Wemimo

I became involved in the Farm to College project in the twilight of my junior year at UMN Crookston. I was employed by NW RSDP for a summer internship and my supervisor was Linda Kingery. My main focus in this role was to see how we could fund the project and how to make it a huge presence on campus. I ended up carrying

out some food research for RSDP that turned into a published white paper that focused on the need for a farm to college project at the University and the NW region. I looked at the positive externalities associated with the project and its importance to the University. My last act as an intern was to conduct a qualitative research study analyzing the student perspective at the dining halls. The results were staggering and because of this study the University took on some changes that are very exciting. They started a compost program and the farm to college program is moving forward.

While I worked on this project, I was able to present my work on the state of the farm to college program at conferences and workshops. So I was very proud of my work and being able to work on the project. I published a white paper titled “Fostering Local Food Procurement: Promoting Sustainable Practices.” This was very exciting for me. I was also able to visit some of the other University campuses that were doing work on local foods and sustainability and was able to show our stakeholders at UMN Crookston why these different

components were important. This was one of the most interesting pieces of my work because I was able to put theory into practice and make a case for a lot of the programing outlined in the white paper.

As a result of conducting this evidence-based advocacy work through RSDP, the University has actually responded and is putting in place different pieces...to make the farm-to-college program a reality.



Photo 2: Student Interns Visit Cornucopia Farm, U of M Twin Cities

So overall, this was a very personally enriching experience to be a part of. I published my work, I presented my findings, I talked to high level stakeholders such as the University Chancellor and Vice Chancellor, and I further developed my research

abilities. I gained very important research and advocacy skills, all in pursuit of the farm to college project and understanding local food procurement. I learned so much both personally and academically.

As a result of conducting this evidence-based advocacy work through RSDP, the University has actually responded and is putting in place different pieces, from composting to a sustainability fellow, to make the farm to college program a reality. I heard that the University has \$30,000 set aside for this project, and we when we

were advocating for it, we were just asking for \$10,000. It is so exciting to see my and RSDP's work being taken seriously by University administration. This response is largely due to the magnificent leadership by Linda, who provided guidance and motivation. So I think all of this would not have been possible without the leadership of Linda and RSDP - who was an excellent mentor, supervisor and always brought her creativity to the table. I give kudos to Linda and her leadership.

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University Collaboration Creates Lasting Change

By Virajita Singh, UMN Project Partner - Collaborator

Baudette Depot Project

NW RSDP collaborated with the U of M Design Center for Community Resilience Program to provide support to create renderings of the Baudette Depot depicting the visions and ideas of the community members. These design documents aided the Depot Preservation Alliance in fundraising and gaining community support. The NW RSDP also provided support for a rain garden workshop that resulted in the construction of an on-site rain garden.

We were involved in the Baudette Depot project through Linda Kingery. As we were beginning our design assistance work for greater MN and other communities (the program is now called Design for Community Resilience), Linda approached us about the Baudette project. This project became one of the projects we worked on with RSDP. Along with Linda and Joanne Kellner, the Depot Preservation Alliance (DPA) Representative, we discussed the possible needs of the project and outlined what we could offer through our Center for Sustainable Research.

vital use to the community. They recognized that the building had value, or at least the potential for value, for future generations. I also noticed how these small communities often have a lot of vision and hope, but not always the resources or expertise locally. It also became clear to me that RSDP plays an important role in these communities. Because they are so grounded in the community, with their citizen-led boards with local meeting and local board members, and because they are also grant makers, RSDP can actually offer communities resources and funding.



Photo 1: The Baudette Depot

There are many aspects of change in this story. From the perspective of the community and the DPA, I saw a really enterprising community that was committed to doing something with the Depot over the long term. The Depot was purchased for a very small amount of money back in 1987, or thereabouts, and the community had hung on to the building with a vision of turning it into something of

I came away from this project with a deeper understanding of the power and value of working with Minnesota communities.

From the perspective of our team within the Design for Community Resilience program, being involved in this project had an impact on many levels. We had a graduate student who turned down a teaching assistantship in order to be involved in the project as a graduate assistant. He was a Fulbright Scholar from Belgium and had very diverse experience from both the architecture side as well as the international perspective. The fact that he turned down the teaching assistantship made me realize that our program should be providing students with many more opportunities to do meaningful work in service of communities.

We also were able to get an undergraduate student involved through the UROP (Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program). This student was originally from Cambodia, but had come to the U.S. from a refugee camp in Thailand. As for myself, I have lived in the U.S. since 1996, but originate from India. So I found it really interesting that we had very international team members working on this project on the edge of the MN-Canadian border. When we went to Baudette, the U.S./Canadian immigration post was right there. This was poignant because all of us had gone through an immigration post at one point in our lives.



Photo 2: The Baudette Depot Project

From a personal perspective, I came away from this project with a deeper understanding of the power and value of working with Minnesota communities. The wisdom that people like Joanne carry is very inspirational – they are a powerhouse in terms of energy and commitment towards the community. Also, at the time the financial crash on Wall Street was happening and I remember thinking: while the Twin Cities and other places were all in a tizzy, in places like Baudette, life went on. People continued doing what they do, like harvest wild rice. It seemed like communities that are more connected to the land and on a smaller scale to the people and each other, are more resilient. That is what

we are interested in when talking about sustainability - not just from an environmental perspective, but also from the social and economic perspective. This experience gave me a glimpse of the strength of our communities.

While I haven't been able to return to Baudette, I thought it was amazing when they officially opened up in 2012. When we were involved, the project only had a few resources, so part of our role was to create documents that were clear and created a vision, visually, so that more fundraising would be possible. The fact that the project was added to and completed speaks to the fact that our contribution made a difference and contributed to a large degree towards the project's next steps.

Lastly, this project highlighted for me the potential for the University to be an intermediary. Sometimes there is tension when the University does work on a project because the consultants may see the University as competition. But our role is really to be the intermediary between the community and the consultants. If we can bring our research and perspective to the community, then the community is able to clarify their vision, and this helps the consultants. That is how we approach these situations but it isn't always clear how the consultants see it. But in this case, the firm that was involved was very happy with the work that we did and felt it was the perfect launching point.

Ultimately, my goal is to continue to create these opportunities for both the communities and the students. The communities need to be able to access the expertise in design and sustainability while the students need the chance to work on real life projects. While we've done many more projects since then, there is still the issue of scale and capacity. We really need to go to the next level - go to more communities and create more opportunities for students. So this is something that I am still working on and perhaps this storytelling will contribute to that. More people will hear about this story and this will help create more opportunities.

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The Local Foods College Inspires a Family Business

By Bob and Joseph Pickle, Project Participants

Local Foods College Project

The Local Food College started in January of 2012 in collaboration with the Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP). Participants learned from practitioners, educators, and those involved in the growing movement to build resilient local foods systems. Participants chose their level of participation and viewing location. Some of the topics include: Soil Quality and Fertility; Specialty Products: Asparagus, Garlic, Wild Foods; Harvester Handbook; Tree Fruit and Berries in High Tunnels. NW RSDP also gained support from e-learning in Extension and the use of Moodle and Qualtrics was also implemented. These resources allowed participants to watch via webinar at several locations throughout northern and central Minnesota, and made it available to be viewed on a home computer. Surveys and other research tools allowed NW RSDP to gain valuable information on this program's progress and impact on our area.

I probably first learned about the Local Foods College (LFC) from an advertisement in our local paper two years ago. We homeschool our children and it seemed like a good educational opportunity for our boys to go through this program. The first year you had to go to one of a number of interconnected locations to hear the lectures. The lecture would be at one campus, and everyone could see the lecturer and participate regardless of which location they were at. One class, though, occurred entirely online due to bad weather, since people just couldn't make it to the sites that night. That online class was sort of an experiment, and the last two LFCs have mostly been online.

So because of the LFC, my boys have gained experience in agriculture, marketing, and salesmanship. It has given them a number of opportunities to learn skills that are very useful in life.

We have participated in LFC the last three springs now, though not as much this spring. The first year they really promoted high tunnels, which are unheated greenhouses. Because we homeschool and wanted practical skills for our kids, the high tunnel idea really grabbed our attention. Two years ago, Joseph was 20 years old and Tim was 17 years old. They then built a 20

ft. x 60 ft. high tunnel. They found the plans and largely did this project on their own. They wouldn't have done it if they hadn't learned about it in the LFC. That first year they sold the vegetables that they produced in the high tunnel to the local grocery store in Halstad and also at three farmers' markets.



Photo 1: The 46.3 oz. tomato

They've produced vegetables in the high tunnel and garden area for two summers now. One Thursday the first year they brought in a huge tomato. I said, "We need to weigh this!" It weighed 46.5 oz. - almost 3 lbs.! I told the boys that the newspapers would want to see this huge tomato but Tim said they didn't have time since they had to get ready for the farmers market. I told him this was something you make time for. It's marketing. I called three newspapers and that huge tomato made it on the front page of two of them. So because of the LFC my boys have gained experience in agriculture, marketing, and salesmanship. It has given them a number of opportunities to learn skills that are very useful in life.

Also because of LFC, my wife feels I have gotten more involved in our garden. Before, much of the gardening was done by the rest of the family. I'm now getting more exercise and the garden has produced more because of the addition of the high tunnel and the expanded garden area. We now have at least three to four times more garden as we did before. Plus the boys are renting four acres, an old farmstead, from the watershed district. They put potatoes, garlic, and squash out there last year but didn't really use all of the space. They now have an older 10 horsepower tractor with a 38 inch tiller from craigslist so that they can do more with it than they did last year. So here at our place we have between a quarter and a half acre of land that we have for producing fruits and vegetables - including the high tunnel. But we also have that old farmstead for producing more food.

One thing that my boys have done is to grow different types of vegetables - some look like your typical vegetable but others are unusual. That huge tomato that made it into the newspapers is a yellow tomato called Persimmon. It has the acid of a red tomato. Before we did LFC we experimented with different varieties too. One of our favorites is Garden Peach, a fuzzy yellow tomato with a red blush. These unusual varieties are of interest in the community. A popular product at the grocery store has been pint-sized containers full of a pretty mix of red, yellow, orange, and chocolate-colored cherry tomatoes. While all of this is small-scale now, it could be something larger in the future. We'll have to see what the boys do with it.

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BCFS: Designed to Feed Members and the Community

By Josh Larson, SHIP Staff – Project Partner

Bemidji Community Food Shelf (BCFS) Project

NW RSDP was supportive in engaging the Food Shelf staff, board, clients and supporters in a design process considering the use of the larger facility that was home to the Bemidji Community Food Shelf. This design phase addressed the priorities for an on-site community garden. The design workshops in Bemidji was heavily supported by the community and supporters of the food shelf. Design material explore options, concepts and models for composting, water harvesting, container gardening and engaging community members.

I was involved in the initial conversations with Jack and Bill (Bemidji Community Food Shelf). I knew that they had moved to a new location which had more land and were thinking about starting a garden so I asked Jack and Bill to meet with me to explain more about what they were thinking. They explained that they wanted to grow food to support the food shelf. They said that it is always a challenge providing food for people but that challenge has been increasing because of the increased need for their support. They also wanted to provide an opportunity for their clients to help produce the food that they needed and had ideas about selling extra produce to help support the food shelf.



Photo 1: BCFS Design Workshop

Jack and Bill had so many ideas; it occurred to me that offering a small mini-grant to start the garden was probably not the best option. I thought that I should talk with Linda Kingery to find out how we (Statewide

Health Improvement Program and NWRSDP) could support this project in a more impactful way. After Linda became involved we visited the location and got a tour of their space and Linda suggested that we seek the expertise of a design team at the University of MN. Linda explained that the team would be able to take all of the ideas and potential opportunities and develop an approach to making this project a reality. It was a wonderful first step and exactly what this project needed.

This project helped me understand that supporting projects with inherent motivation for sustainability can be more successful than projects blessed solely with financial sustainability.

The most significant aspect of this project when I was involved was the decision to use a design team from the U of M. They did a wonderful job gathering input and creating different stages of development for the program with budgets tied to each stage/project. It gave the group direction and a vision that everyone could see. It also made the project manageable...it would have been very easy to get discouraged because there is so much opportunity that will take a lot of money and work to finish the entire design. However, designing the project with smaller projects built in made it easier to stay focused and positive about the overall project.

In my world there is so much talk about sustainability...it seems to me that nothing is sustainable without sustained dedication from individuals (and sustained financial support) or profits. We have helped create gardens, farmers markets, and have supported many other projects. This project has very dedicated individuals but the major significance or difference is that instead of focusing on how to sustain this project, we focused on a project that we hoped would help sustain something greater...the food shelf.

When we decided to support this project it was the first time that we had supported something with this thought so clearly in mind and I believe that is the most significant thing we could have done. This project will succeed because it has dedicated people and a great plan, but more importantly the Bemidji Community Food Shelf will succeed because they had the vision to see that they had to help support themselves with this food production project.



Photo 2: Bemidji Community Food Shelf Project

This project helped me understand that supporting projects with inherent motivation for sustainability can be more successful than projects blessed solely with financial sustainability.

This is a great project and it wouldn't have happened without many partners; one of them being the NWRSDP and the expertise and resources that Linda Kingery provides. Thank you!

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Creating Deep Relationships Lies in the Roots

By Chuck and Barbara Schulstad, Farmers Market Mentors & Participants

Promoting Farmers Markets Project

In 2011 students in an integrated marketing communication class at U of M Crookston were involved in a service-learning project to help farmers markets in Northwest Minnesota. Research results identified target markets and their characteristics, including the demographics and psychographics. Recommendations were made ranging from sales promotions to reaching consumers through print, radio and other media. The markets and member vendors collaborated in seeking assistance in market promotion. MN Grown was also involved in the development of a regional label. A custom cover on the MN Grown Directory promotional material was created to enhance marketing efforts. NW RSDP and the Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP) selected and implemented promotional support on issues with high priorities. Market vendors act as market mentors to assist other vendors with their Farmers Market efforts.

Our farmers market connection starts in 2006. Barb and I were quite newly retired from our careers as elementary school educators, having spent nearly 40 years in the Fargo, ND Public Schools. We had retired to our Schulstad family century farm in 2003 and were actively involved with gardening and managing a U-pick raspberry patch. Berry pickers would often notice our garden next to the patch and ask if we had any produce for sale. At that time we had not considered raising produce in salable quantities, but the idea began to take shape. In 2006, the University of Minnesota's Master Gardener class was offered during the summer in Thief River Falls, so we decided it was time to learn even more about how to raise farm and garden fresh crops.



Photo 1: Chuck with U of M High Tunnel Raspberry Trials at our Farm

Not only has [belonging to the Farmers Market project] brought growth to our own skills of being growers, but it has brought the University of Minnesota right into our farm yard.

It was during these series of wonderful classes that we were introduced to the concept of using a greenhouse type structure to extend the growing season for vegetable crops. They are called "high tunnels" or "hoop houses." We got excited about the possibility of having ripe tomatoes, among other things, in early July when folks were here picking raspberries, so the next summer we erected our first high tunnel, completing it in the fall of 2006. The next season we applied our new skills of raising produce crops in the high tunnel and everything we had been taught about them came true! However, we had underestimated the volume of tomatoes and produce that could be raised in the tunnels and by mid-July we had more produce than we knew what to do with.

Our close neighbors were instrumental in organizing and setting up the Mentor Farmer Market and when we saw the ad in the paper calling for customers and vendors, we thought this might work for us. Well, work it

did. We have been vendors since 2007 and have now become involved with the administration of the Mentor Market as well. We currently have about 17 vendors, a wonderfully accessible corner of the Mentor Park for our market locale and a seemingly appreciative and



Photo 2: Barbara at our Vendor Stand at the MFM

enthusiastic consumer base.

Belonging to the Farmers Market has had a major impact on our lives! Not only has it brought growth to our own skills of being growers, but has brought the University of Minnesota right into our farm yard.

We have been honored to be selected to supervise two new University-sponsored high tunnels in which small fruit and large fruit trees have been planted in experimental settings. This continues to be a grower's delight. However, perhaps the most exciting thing that has happened involves the customers at the market. It has been really joyful to see people enjoying their shopping at the market as they find fresh fruit and produce, homemade breads / pastries / bagels / baking, handmade jewelry / crafts / artwork, fresh local honey, quilts, creative clothing, fresh eggs and much more.

I heard it said, soon after we had started our market venture, that a good farmers market will not only have

excellent items, but will expend time and energy on developing relationships with their customers. Barb and I have certainly found that to be true. We have found ourselves learning names, establishing friendships, and developing interests in who shops the market, and thus finding out what they want in a good farmers market. It is enjoyable to meet and greet these friends now where ever we might see them.



Photo 3: U of M Field Day at the Tunnels on our Farm.

The relationship opportunities extend also to our fellow vendors. By working together to make the market better, we have found ourselves feeling like we are members of a larger family, concerned about and caring for each other. Interests deepen in each other and this tends to transmit to an overall sense of well-being in the market in general. So, the Farmers Market has added another level of interest to our lives by allowing us to pursue our hobby of gardening and turn it into a benefit to the community as well as an additional source of income for us in retirement. But, most of all it has placed us in an ever widening circle of contacts with, and enjoyment of, our fellow human beings.

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Supporting Community Growth by Pushing Tech Boundaries

By Alison Link, Project Tech Support

Local Foods College Project

The Local Food College started in January of 2012 in collaboration with the Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP). Participants learned from practitioners, educators, and those involved in the growing movement to build resilient local foods systems. Participants chose their level of participation and viewing location. Some of the topics include: Soil Quality and Fertility; Specialty Products: Asparagus, Garlic, Wild Foods; Harvester Handbook; Tree Fruit and Berries in High Tunnels. NW RSDP also gained support from e-learning in Extension and the use of Moodle and Qualtrics was also implemented. These resources allowed participants to watch via webinar at several locations throughout northern and central Minnesota, and made it available to be viewed on a home computer. Surveys and other research tools allowed NW RSDP to gain valuable information on this program's progress and impact on our area.

As part of this year's Local Foods College (LFC) project, Linda submitted an e-learning proposal for in-kind support from the University of Minnesota Extension. This is my first year in Extension and this project was part of the first round of projects under my belt in this role supporting academic technology for Extension. Linda was great about collaborating with the team and doing the project management while I helped them connect the technical dots. For example, my role was to help the group conceive of what technical tools they could use, try out the tools, see how they fit, and empower the group to use these tools in the future for

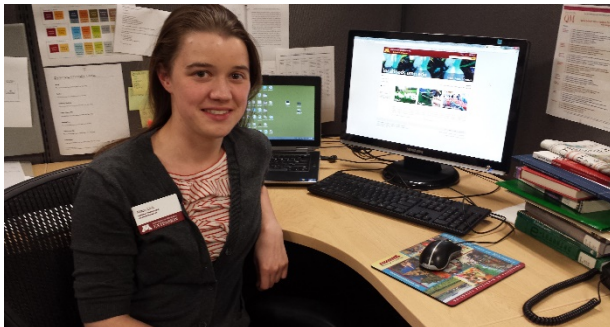


Photo 1: Alison Link

future colleges.

Because my role has been as internal support rather than as a participant, my story is more of a hidden one - behind the scenes. To take a step back, the University provides a set of centrally-supported technology for use by the University community - so in this case the Local Foods College has access to it. The LFC has taken a very novel way of using this technology - for example we

ended up using a new survey tool to get at audience analysis and LFC was one of the first groups to use this tool. I can now bring their experience using the survey tool to other groups internally across Extension.

...the LFC Group has a very large community, and it has forced us – in the U's tech world – to push the envelope in trying out new tools.

Another example is that the LFC group moved to a University Moodle site for hosting discussions and to provide more interactivity for participants before and after each session. What is interesting about the LFC moving to this Moodle platform is that no one else that I know of has used it in this way before - Moodle is typically used for academic year courses or courses with more bounded enrollment requirements. But this year LFC's registration got very big and Linda, from previous experience exploring open online courses, liked the idea of having two different ways for people to engage in the course content. Those who wanted to explore and be more engaged could, while others who didn't want to be so engaged could just observe.

As far as I know, the U's tech community had not seen these different levels of engagement and it was interesting to find a way to figure out how to use Moodle. As the tech liaison, I do my best to bring user needs for the system to the U's system maintainers and

we ran into some interesting hurdles. For example, in order to allow people to click into Moodle as an observer, we had to allow anonymous access for those participants. The LFC needed this flexibility with this platform so that people could sign up and engage in the courses the way that they wanted to. As far as I can tell, LFC is the only group to use Moodle in this bigger way.

In my meetings with people who support the platform, the LFC was a completely different beast to them, which was a good thing. For example, they were thinking about eventually getting rid of the anonymous access capability. But I was able to tell them that I have a group using it and was able to show the importance of this function internally and make sure we preserve it moving forward. Also, because I had interesting examples of emerging ways to use this technology, I was able to go back to different places in the University and tell them that my groups had certain needs moving forward. So when the U began making updates to Moodle for the fall, I made sure we had this conversation around anonymous access and casual observing. I was able to test the updated version and make sure it worked the way we expected it to work and now this function is built into Moodle and is hopefully established for the foreseeable future. The LFC has provided an interesting challenge in the U's tech space - it has been eye-opening to discover how groups want to use the technology in this innovative way. Other people in the University have looked at the LFC site, toured it and seen how its setup is specific for this style of outreach.

This story is significant for me because the LFC group has a very strong community, and it has forced us – in the U's tech world – to push the envelope in trying out new tools. This year registration for the LFC was so large that there was a concern that so many people would not fit on the existing webinar platform. So we tried out a new platform, although in the end we had enough attrition that we were able to use the old platform. I've taken these stories of pushing our technical limits to colleagues in the tech world and could report back on both successes and snags encountered.

It is very clear that the LFC is a big and growing community whose use of these technical tools is very important to how the group reaches out and engages with the community. I've been really glad to see how

bold they have been in supporting these new technologies to reach their expanding audience, even with the usual growing pains involved. Importantly, this means that any lesson learned from this project, I can take back to the University and demonstrate the need to keep pushing ourselves technically. I think groups like RSDP really push the envelope more than other groups or traditional departments at the University - they tend to be the ones to work in these innovative spaces to reach their audience.

I do proudly tell my technical colleagues this LFC story - even though sometimes it is about scrambling to figure things out. I even have a colleague in the College of Food, Agricultural, and Natural Resource Science who saw the LFC site and has followed up with me to ask about how it worked and what LFC wants to continue to do with it. The LFC site has caused some buzz in providing a sense of how their model could work for other groups.

On a personal note, if had I not been pulled in for tech support on this project, I don't know that I would have found out about local foods. But I got very excited about the LFC's community and outreach, and it was something that my sister is already very involved in. I told her about it and she signed up for it from out in Ohio—something that I recognize was only possible because the LFC took place online! It was something that I was proud to be involved in because my sister is very engaged in this community and it was something we could share.

Another result of my involvement in this project is that I found out about a local farm that sells maple syrup – Sapsucker Farms. I had never heard of them before they became a participant of LFC, but the woman who runs the farm posted a short introduction on our video discussion board on the LFC Moodle site, so I looked them up and found their Twitter account and blog. Now I'm planning to buy gifts from them for friends and family out of state! Lastly, I didn't know about this beforehand, but last year there was a group of about 10 people who would meet to watch the webinars and it turns out I live very close to their meeting location in North Minneapolis. I'm hoping they do it again this year so that I can participate.

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Paddling with a Purpose and Making Watershed Connections

By Wayne Goeken, IWI Special Projects Coordinator – Project Partner

River Explorers Project

NW RSDP understands the need to connect youth to the natural world around them; therefore, it has supported the River Explorers program. This program, coordinated by the International Water Institute (IWI), provides equipment and training to allow more river outings by River Watch teams and community participants. The program is designed to connect youth and communities to local waterways; document and share riverine conditions with resource managers; promote inquiry, learning, and further involvement in local watersheds; encourage physical activity; and instill a sense of place for local residents and promote tourism through river excursion activities.

I was involved in the initial development of the River Explorers activity as part of a broader River Watch citizen water quality monitoring program funded by the MN Legislative Clean Water Legacy Fund in 2012-2013. Due to the interest shown by our high school River Watch teams and local resource managers in the River Explorers activity of engaging students in kayaking their local rivers to better understand and document conditions that affect water quality there was interest in expanding the program. I approached the NW Regional Sustainable Development Partnership with a proposal to assist in expanding the program as part of their natural resource efforts to get kids outdoors and connected to the natural world and promote rivers as assets to the tourism base of the region. The project was funded and I

was also providing opportunities for non-River Watch youth audiences (4-H, science camps) and adults to become familiar with their local waters via kayak paddling experiences.

...the River Explorers activity is going to make a huge difference in students connecting not only to their local reach of river, but to their upstream and downstream neighbors as we scout and share information on river reaches that can be paddled.

The River Explorers program is our most recent activity to engage students in making connections to their local watershed and to the Red River Basin at large. I consider the River Explorers program as still being in its formative stages as we refine our protocols for safely conducting the river trips, how we coordinate logistics for implementation, and how to share information gathered from the trips. I believe at the early stages of the program, the most significant change has been on my colleagues who are helping to organize and implement the program. There is a great deal of excitement and energy by our staff and partners to get all our schools out to connect to their local rivers. We've already seen that the students have a blast while out paddling—as most have not kayaked before, much less explored their “backyard” by water.



Photo 1: Grygla River Watch team kayaking Thief River--student showing instructor map on iPad of team's location.

am now assisting with implementation of getting not only River Watch students out to explore their local

I also feel that the River Explorers activity is going to make a huge difference in students connecting not only to their local reach of river, but to their upstream and downstream neighbors as we scout and share information on river reaches that can be paddled. They will get a better sense of place of where their local watershed fits into the big picture—how they are connected to the big picture—the health of Lake Winnipeg. I believe this will be the long-range impact of the River Explorers program—a better understanding of the connections between cause and effect—that what is happening on the land impacts our rivers and what we all can be doing to foster sustainable futures for our watersheds.

I am beginning my 20th year of working with the River Watch program in the Red River Basin. The program has already made a difference in our knowledge and understanding of our rivers and watersheds. Some of the students that have participated have gone on to careers in watershed science related fields. I believe involvement in River Explorers will make an impression with participants that will last a lifetime for a far greater number of students as they will make direct connections between what they see on their paddling trips with the water quality data that they have been collecting. Providing students exposure to kayaking, a fun and inexpensive recreational pursuit that engages them in a healthy outdoor activity, also will help them realize that there are excellent recreational opportunities close to home—and the importance and opportunity we all have to help improve and protect our watersheds. I've been paddling rivers for nearly twice that long. It has been discouraging at times to see that many students were not

“getting” the connections between water quality and



Photo 2: Bagley River Watch team kayaking Clearwater River--team paddling through some wild rice beds along river.

enjoyment of our river resources.

For most, being involved in River Watch is an extracurricular activity with no additional connection to their local river. As I've been out with the initial schools on kayak outings it has been gratifying to see students become more interested in what actually is going on in and along our rivers. It has become easier and more fun to connect with students in the field and also back in the classroom when we review their data as we can recall what we discovered on the river and better understand the WHY behind their data findings. Lastly, River Explorers has our staff and colleagues super excited about the possibilities and really looking forward to getting kids out on the water, and this wouldn't be possible if not for the many partners who have supported River Watch through the years and continually strive to find innovative ways to support watershed education for our next generation of watershed stewards.

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Leveraging Resources

By Peter Phaiah, U of M Crookston Administrator – Project Partner

Farm-to-College Project

Students from the U of M Crookston participated in the SELF Sustain event at U of M Morris in 2011. In 2012 a Food Advisory Board was initiated on the U of M Crookston campus. Student, Abby Wemimo conducted qualitative research on “The Importance of Sustainability to the U of M Crookston student body” (2012/2013). Student interns visited the Cornucopia Farm at the U of M Twin Cities campus in 2012. A Real Food Challenge was started to help establish a quantitative rubric for U of M Crookston dining services in 2013.

I work with the University Extension program in trying to get a campus garden project up and running so that the food it would produce can be used in our residential food service program. We are in the process of nailing down the property, but we've secured the grants and the resources from the University have been great. We are also trying to get local farmers to supply their produce and sell locally. University of Minnesota Extension folks like Linda Kingery (RSDP member) and Deb Zack have been really helpful in this process in helping us to make connections. So far we have had 5 garden dinner parties, where local people from the community, such as Linda and local farmers, participate.

I'm familiar with this concept of a farm-to-college model because a lot of other universities are using it in some form or other. I'm originally from New England and I'm familiar with the farm to college program in Vermont. Our University uses Sodexo as our food service management company. This company works with farm to college programs at other universities (for example in Pittsburg) and they have really been pushing us to pursue this model and are willing to work with us regarding all of the food safety requirements. Importantly, anything we produce on campus, they can purchase and serve in our cafeterias. So we are really trying to get this garden going.

We are already doing some small things. For example, we are taking our cooking oil grease and turn it into biodiesel fuel. We take our food slop and turn it into composting. Once the campus garden is up and running, we should producing enough quality compost for that project, as well as for any future high tunnels or greenhouse expansions.

My role at the University is Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management, but I also oversee our food services. One of my tasks is to try and connect the practical experience that students can get from the garden with sustainability and the reduction of our footprint. So not only can we get good quality produce on the tables in our cafeterias, but engage our students in the process. They learn hands-on management, marketing, production, and sustainability skills. This is an enrichment opportunity that enhances their student experience. This is one of the main reasons why I'm involved.

While we all have our own separate missions and vision, our continual partnerships and collaborations make us collectively stronger. Together we can be the “to-go-to” resource place here in NW Minnesota.

I think the story here is that NW Minnesota and U of M Crookston are real fortunate to have the U of M Extension and the Northwest Research and Outreach Center on our campus. This provides a great foundation for us to leverage our knowledge, expertise and resources. Specifically, the U of M Extension works very closely with rural development and the NW RSDP. We collaborate to share facilities, staff, interns, joint funding and hosting regional conferences on our campus. The U of M Extension and NW RSDP are great partners and we will be looking to them for considerable input once we get the green light on the

campus garden. I think we'll be a better partner in this farm to college program.

While we all have our own separate missions and vision, our continual partnerships and collaborations make us collectively stronger. Together we can be the "go-to" resource place here in NW Minnesota. I believe there is an expectation from our various constituents that we be good stewards of our resource and work collaboratively.

Part of this story is that, as a University, we have students who are our future. They see agencies that are working together, collaborating, sharing facilities and expertise. We should be good role models in our regional actions, support and services. We believe this reinforces their educational experience by getting them engaged in practical community service, internships, and through service learning projects. These out of the classroom or co-curricular experience also help them to network which come in handy for jobs, references and possible future professional connections. So once again, I'm very supportive of these programs where UMC and its partners work collaboratively and engage our students in the process.

On more of a personal note, since I have been involved in our Farm to College efforts, my wife and I have decided that we too can do something about sustainability at home. My wife has worms for

composting and we have been doubling the size of our garden these past 2 years. We have consciously changed the way we do things around the house, whether that is through recycling or composting, and we've gotten our son involved. Even in our neighborhood other neighbors have been inquiring on what and how we are doing things. We have seen a few more gardens pop up in the last year or so. Most of our close neighbors have 1 acre of land and some people are growing crops while others have animals or greenhouses. It is a great image in the community when everyone is doing something about sustainability.

One of the biggest thrills my wife gets from gardening is working with the children in a garden plot at our local elementary school. Many of the school kids have never been in a garden. They get a real kick to actively plant, care for, harvest and then eat the fresh produce.

So this movement towards healthy, sustainable living is community-wide movement, with the farm-to-college project being just one component.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my story!

Peter

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Tree Cookies, Mud Pies, and Social Capital

By Eric Castle, U of M Crookston Faculty – Project Partner

Connecting Children and Nature Project

In an effort to encourage young children to reconnect with nature the U of M Crookston hosted the Connecting Children and Nature Conference in 2010. The conference was funded by a grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and was sponsored by USFWS, Rydell Wildlife Refuge, RSDP, Extension Environmental Science Education, U of M Crookston, NW Statewide Health Improvement Program Cluster, Northwest Regional Development Commission, and U of M Regional Extension - Crookston. With funding from these groups, NW RSDP was able to award 25 mini-grants to community groups interested in connecting children and nature. Support to design a Natural Play Space in Warren, Crookston, and Fertile was also achieved from 2011-2012. NW RSDP conducted research on the public health benefits natural play spaces can bring to communities like these.

I first became involved in the project after the Connecting Children and Nature conference held here on the U of M Crookston campus. At that point I was invited to be involved in the project. The change that I found to be most significant is the development of a process that allows a community to develop natural place spaces and allows them to implement them in a collaborative way that is easy for people to implement. It was something that was very cost effective for smaller towns in terms of what traditional parks and playgrounds cost. We are able to make it accessible for towns that don't have large budgets to pay for parks. The whole process has been very beneficial for me.

I feel that community connections and building trust between community members, organizations, government offices, and public institutions is really important because research shows that those connections are not as strong as they once were, this social capital is declining in our country as a whole. It's important to rebuild these relationships and work to make connections between these entities. And that's what this project allowed us to do. For example, working with the Northwest Regional Sustainable Development Partnership, the Polk County Health offices and others in various counties, and U of M Crookston campus were able to come together to form great relationships and networks. And we are able to reach out to communities to help them. So this is valuable to me, we are able to use the expertise and knowledge from various entities and come together and work on a project. Because of these

connections we can bring resources and advice to others. I remember a comment made by a community member who stated that this was a fantastic use of resources, all of it together was something extremely valuable and a tangible benefit that he could see. These organizations were providing community members with the opportunity to get involved and engaged in the process themselves.

I remember a comment made by a community member, who stated that this [project] was a fantastic use of resources – all of it together was something extremely valuable and a tangible benefit that he could see.

I knew that nature play is really important to me personally and in my profession. I really didn't know how the community would respond to a project like this. We wanted children to have a heavy hand in what happened in the space so I was not sure how the community would respond to this type of esthetic. I have been pleasantly surprised at how receptive the community has been to them. I find that kids have been utilizing the space and they have enjoyed them very much. I am pleased that it has been well received.

Creating these natural play places and creating awareness of the disconnection that children are having with nature is important. Children should have the opportunity to have free play out in nature. They should have a sense of ownership as they play and leave their thumb print on the things they create. Kids need a space that is unstructured with no adults saying this is what you should do or how you should do it. Creating places like this allows kids to use their imagination and they are able to play freely. Having a place like this not only allows children to play at will, but also helps us create relationships among community members. It also allows me to do research on this topic of connecting children and nature and the added benefits obtained by it. I can ask questions that have not been asked yet and work to find the answers. I focus on the benefits of

nature play that we are enabling in these spaces. Another crucial part of this is that it also allows me to hire students to do the planning and design work. This opportunity is a tremendous learning experience for them. It gives them real world experience, they implement the things they learned in class and they are able to work with a client. I know that these experiences have been beneficial for them.

Lastly, I feel that my relationships with partners has deepened and strengthened. I have expanded my connections with people and it has spurred more projects. Doing these projects has raised the awareness about what the University has to offer and how we can all work together on a common goal, which in turn raises our social capital.

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Garden Takes Root to Improve Health

By Jason Bergstrand, PartnerSHIP 4 Health Manager – Project Partner

Community and School Gardens Project

In 2012 NW RSDP awarded 11 mini-grants to NW area community and school garden projects. Four free workshops were held across Northwest Minnesota focusing on making community and school gardens a success. The workshops were developed by the American Community Garden Association (ACGA). Participants in the workshops learned how to develop community building and organizational skills to make their gardens beneficial. Mini-Grants for 15 projects were also awarded in 2013 in collaboration with Growing Communities workshops.

RSDP provided a community mini grant to Lake Region Takes Root during the spring of 2013. The funds were used to purchase much needed start-up equipment and supplies such as shovels, hula hoes, pitch fork and dozens of tomato cages. The purpose of the garden is to provide nutrient-dense whole foods to families in need throughout Otter Tail County in an effort to improve health, community and self- efficacy. In our first year we were able to grow 1600 lbs. of food that served 300 families. Foods were provided to Women Infant Children's (WIC) program, Fergus Falls Food Shelf, Matthew House and A Place to Belong.

Noelle Harden, UMN Extension Educator, also made several trips to the garden to learn more about our mission and find ways to better connect us to other expertise and resources. We also participated in the workshop which is always a great opportunity to network, and learn new methods and from others' successes.

Many young families from the WIC program participated every Monday in the planting, maintaining and harvesting of the garden. It was wonderful to see them be an active participant in this process. They brought their children to the garden to also learn and play. On WIC voucher pick-up day, a county extension agent periodically provided taste testing recipes using the fresh garden produce. Children and their parents could taste and learn new ways of preparing healthy whole foods for their families.

One participant stated "I am so grateful for the opportunity that the community garden has provided my

family. We've learned how to create a small raised garden bed for ourselves and my children are learning to appreciate fresh vegetables more than I could have ever imaged."

I am involved in this project because it engages the greater community to be a part of the solution to a specific, identified community need.

Another HUGE piece to the success of this project is all of the volunteers that come faithfully each week to serve. We have many individual and group volunteers throughout the year. They help with routine garden tasks and special infrastructure projects to keep the garden well maintained and productive. It always warms your heart when others get inspired and catch the flame within to want to help others in need.

A policy development that came out of this project is that Fergus Falls updated its ordinance on composting. The community garden wanted to practice environmentally sound practices but quickly realized that the current ordinance did not allow for large-scale composting. We brought the issue before the city council. After learning about the mission of the community garden, the city council wanted to do its part in supporting this effort and one of those ways was to adopt an improved composting ordinance that did a better job of considering the needs of residents and allowed

composting to be scaled-up depending on the size of the property.

These stories are important because it shows how decision makers can provide real leadership in their community that ultimately benefits its citizens. It is also important because we know the efforts of the many community volunteers are impacting some of our most vulnerable populations by increasing access to healthy whole foods and providing new learning opportunities. This will in turn strengthen the resolve of the community and ultimately improve community health.

I am involved in a project like this because it engages the greater community to be a part of the solution to a specific, identified community need. What's exciting is that this project is making a meaningful difference in people's lives and can serve as a model to be replicated elsewhere. When more people have better access to whole foods it leads to lifelong healthy eating habits and improved health of its residents. To see the volunteers step up and develop the passion for serving others only motivates me to want to do more.

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