



Love in Minnesota

Roots 'n Reading: nutrition for the body and soul

by Sarah Henkemeyer

“As a former farm girl, I understand the power that digging your hands into the earth has. It isn't just nutrition for the body, but also for the soul,” Franciscan Sister Patricia Tekippe states when asked why Project for Pride in Living's Roots 'n Reading program, combining gardening and reading assistance for young students, holds such appeal and has garnered an FSPA grant.

Roots 'n Reading is in its third year of getting kids' hands dirty, with program locations in both St. Paul and a first ring Minneapolis suburb. “Roots 'n Reading grew out of our existing after-school educational programming. The kids wanted to do something a little different over the summer, and the idea of a garden took root!” states Shannon Siegfried Floe, youth program manager at Project for Pride in Living.

Since 1972, Project for Pride in Living has been dedicated to empowering low-income people to become self-reliant through integrated services. Its success has been fueled by a dedication to listen to the community's needs. In this case, it's the importance of summer reading assistance combined with the ideal of a summer garden.

Summer isn't only an opportunity to improve reading skills, it is also a crucial time to keep young minds active. The summer slide that happens when a student's young mind sits idle for the entire season is acutely felt once



Sister Patricia Tekippe and Youth Program Manager Shannon Siegfried Floe pose with a Roots 'n Reading student who participates in the program's summertime fun.

the school year resumes.

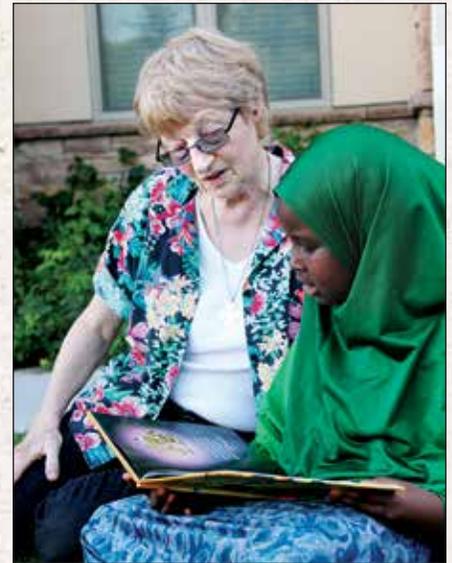
“When I was teaching, each fall I could instantly tell if kids had a leg up in the summer. If they did, the first day they're ready to go. If not, the summer slide contributes to a loss of skills and confidence. That loss means that kids are more likely to act out because they're less secure in their abilities,” Sister Patricia says.

According to Shannon, the program offers a volunteer-to-student ratio of between 1:1 and 1:3. “And not only have the kids maintained or improved their reading skills, they are also able to build positive relationships with their volunteer tutors.” She continues, “With many kids coming from low-income or immigrant families, building those close relationships with caring adults is also a big win and contributes to school success.”

Building a garden is another great opportunity for the kids to learn. “They learn about what seeds do and what a plant needs in order to grow. We've also learned that many of the kids are big fans of kale! But most importantly, the garden gives them a heightened awareness about their world and a new way to satisfy their curiosity. The kids really get a thrill out of seeing the whole cycle from seed to the vegetable they're about to eat,” Shannon says.

Volunteer Master Gardeners help with the garden. With each program meeting two evenings a week (with a third afternoon of gardening work done by staff), community members have stepped up to help weed and water the gardens on the days the program doesn't meet.

Many Roots 'n Reading participants are recent immigrants, now in Minnesota, hearing stories of what family members left behind, including a connection to the land. Other participants are from economically challenged families with a curiosity about some of the other



As a former teacher, Sister Patricia Tekippe always encouraged her students to read during summer break, preventing summer slide. She proudly supports an FSPA ministry grant that aims to keep children reading, all summer long.

community gardens they've seen spring up around the Twin Cities in the last few years. In both cases, there is a pride in bringing home some of the bounty the kids have worked hard to make happen.

The combination of busy hands and busy minds is working. Shannon says, "We not only see kids return each year, but we've seen the kids grow. There was one older boy in our program last year who was really disengaged from the group. The group leader saw this and gave him a leadership role. He was asked to take notes each evening, tracking the vocabulary words that were used. He took the task seriously and was really proud of his success. His younger siblings have returned to the program."

This progress pleases Sister Patricia. "The FSPA funding guidelines have always prioritized educational programs. What we save by living frugally can go to programs like this. I'm so happy that these kids can get their hands in the soil and grow things. I really do believe this



A former farm girl, Sister Patricia Tekippe says she understands "the power that digging your hands into the earth has."

Photos by Vendi

brings a connectedness to the Creator, a rootedness."

After the last vegetables are harvested, kids take away a feeling of accomplishment and of having seen an entire life cycle happen in a few short Minnesota summer months. New recipes and flavor combinations have been learned and above all else, a love of reading has flourished.

And that, says Shannon, is the greatest thing she's seen come from the program. "We hear the kids tell us that they really like reading now. Maybe because the atmosphere is more relaxed or the books that their tutors bring are a perfect fit, but something flips and they

begin to see that reading can be for enjoyment. There's a real excitement that comes from that realization."

Thanks to the support of the FSPA, that excitement continues for another year. ■

Sarah Henkemeyer is a freelance writer who lives in the greater Minneapolis-St. Paul area.