

Metropolitan State garden benefits community

by Harvey Meyer

It's springtime and the sun is shining brightly. A breeze is gently caressing Metropolitan State students as they cultivate, mulch, fertilize and plant in a community garden.

What better way for the students to earn college credit—while also serving the East Side. The community garden, offered for the third semester on land east of the St. Paul Campus Library and Learning Center, is the brainchild of August Hoffman, associate professor of psychology at Metropolitan State. Hoffman believes the garden offers symbolic and practical benefits.

“Because of our fast-paced world and over-reliance on technology, among other things, people have become more polarized,” said Hoffman, who has coauthored a book called *Unity Through Community Service Work: Strategies to Bridge Ethnic and Cultural Divides*. “So there are fewer opportunities for people to come together and work cooperatively.” Community service work performed by students at the community garden is an illustration of collective action benefiting others.

Beyond that, Hoffman said, gardening offers a forum where students can get to know and understand each other better, perhaps debunking negative stereotypes. And while students enhance their cultivating, mulching and other gardening skills, members of the East Side community benefit from the nutritious foodstuffs.

A large portion of the cabbage, cauliflower, tomatoes, corn, potatoes and other vegetables are donated to the nearby First Lutheran Church, which has supplied water for the 20 x 20 foot plot. Sometime in June and July the vegetables will be hand-delivered to the homeless attending the church's Wednesday evening wellness program. Other community members will also profit from the garden's harvest and fruit picked from close-by apple, plum and other trees.

“The students enjoy interacting with community members and making a contribution to the community,” said Hoffman, adding that about 150 students donated time since spring 2009. Most opt to perform community service over writing an academic paper. “It helps give the students a sense of purpose.”

In addition to the community garden, students also helped seed native plants and flowers adjacent to Metropolitan State's Library and Learning Center. There is also discussion about planting cherry blossom trees and developing a rainwater garden on the St. Paul campus. Ultimately, said Hoffman, he hopes students can further develop their green thumbs in a vacant greenhouse next to the community garden.

Hoffman said he expects the garden and other activities to help bond the university and community. “I've already seen more of a connection,” he said, “and I anticipate that will only improve.”

Harvey Meyer is an Academic Writer/Editor at Metropolitan State.

Metropolitan State students take on hunger and homelessness

by August Hoffman

Community service work: a problem in everyone's backyard.

Unfortunately the problem of homelessness and persons generally in need have increased significantly here in St. Paul, Minnesota. A recent survey conducted by the St. Paul Wilder Research Group estimates that the problem of homelessness has increased over 20% within the last year, and over 9,452 persons now are designated as homeless.

Civic engagement and community service volunteers are needed more than ever, yet attitudes of self-entitlement and increases in “blaming the victim” have hampered our efforts to reach the homeless. The economic recession has also exacerbated the problem of homelessness and decreased the number of items donated to the homeless. One increasingly effective method in addressing these problems is the development of a coalition among community members.

Students at Metropolitan State University enrolled in my graduate course in community psychology (Psy 602) have decided to try to help by contacting various sponsors and donors to organize nonperishable food items and basic grooming essentials (toothpaste, socks, underwear and deodorant) to help combat the problem.

Our psychology students have created a partnership with the First Lutheran Church at 463 Maria Avenue where on April 14, students sponsored a free community barbeque for the

homeless and the needy. All of the food items were donated by various agencies and businesses and were prepared by Metropolitan State University students for the community members. Additionally, our students organized a community basket that contained a variety of donated items to be used by the homeless community. The students have felt an enormous sense of pride and responsibility in helping people, which fits the theme of community psychology. The idea is one method of putting theory in psychology into action, and a great way for people to feel and experience a sense of social connectedness and responsibility. In my own view, the more opportunities that we create for people to help one another, the more likely we feel a sense of responsibility to each other. This will not only help reduce social problems such as those related to homelessness, but also can help people to understand each other and reduce antisocial behaviors (NIMBYism) and bias against underrepresented groups.

August Hoffman is an associate professor of psychology at Metropolitan State University.

WaterFest 2010 at Phalen Park

On Saturday, May 22, at the Phalen Park Pavilion, families from around the Twin Cities are invited to a day of lakeside fun at WaterFest 2010. Sponsored by the Ramsey-Washington Metro Watershed District, the cities of St. Paul, Maplewood and North St. Paul and other partners, WaterFest



Hmong Youth Education Services in the former Margaret Rec Center

Partnering for Success with Hmong Youth Education Services

by Jennifer Marcus Newton

The last few years have played like a skipping record stuck on a tiresome tune of staff cuts and reduced services due to the City of St. Paul's budget deficit. Despite all the recent losses, Margaret Rec Center has gained a new dance partner: Hmong Youth Education Services (HYES).

In concert with the organization's move to its new home in Dayton's Bluff, HYES also expanded its Hmong youth focus to include all community youth. During one of many conversations with community members and city representatives prior to the partnership, Executive Director LiCho Xenexai put it this way: HYES is about helping kids envision successful futures for themselves by focusing on college prep and teaching life skills, like the art of self-discipline, as well as how to work independently and live responsibly. Further, HYES strives to provide academic support in the form of tutoring and mentoring to help kids fully realize their potential. Strengthening community by mentoring and empowering kids is an approach that really resonated with Margaret Rec Center community members. And if there's one thing Dayton's Bluff knows, it's potential.

Since the group's arrival in November last year, HYES has quite literally transformed the Margaret Rec Center by turning a bleak lower-level meeting room into a bright, modern computer lab outfitted with (you guessed it) computers. HYES has also installed fresh carpeting throughout the upper level, given a long-overdue scrub to the building's mechanicals and other neglected areas—including the infamous skylights—and generally breathed new life into a tired space. But the crescendo of improvements has to be the Hmong art collection that now adorns many walls throughout the center. The pieces don't just camouflage the bunker-like concrete walls; they weave a beautifully rich and complex story of our shared human condition.

HYES, located in the Margaret Rec Center at 1109 Margaret Street, is open weekdays from 9 am to 6 pm. Take advantage of free tutoring for grades 1 to 12 four days a week. Get together with pals for open gym a few days a week. Meet the fabulous HYES staff or join neighbors for the monthly Margaret Rec Center (MRC) Block Club meeting (second Thursday of the month). And don't forget to check out the artwork.

Jennifer Marcus Newton is a member of the MRC Block Club.

is a celebration of our clean lakes and an opportunity for hands-on learning about the water quality, wildlife, and special ecological features of our beautiful watershed.

Kick off WaterFest with a parade featuring students, clowns and mascots at 10:00 am. Enjoy activities throughout the day including:

- Fun 5K Walk/Run around Lake Phalen
- Raindrop Mystery Hunt for prizes
- Geocaching for water treasures
- Wilderness Inquiry Voyageur canoe rides
- Kids' fishing lessons and fish demonstrations
- Rain garden tours and native plant giveaways
- Raptors and other live animals
- Clowns, art and water games
- Student artistic, scientific and service project displays

- Professional exhibits on landscaping, shorelines, watersheds and ecosystems
- Street sweeper, snowplow and storm drain stenciling demonstrations
- Photos with LEAP Frog
- Food for sale at the Pavilion

Finally, Minnesota Renewable Energy Society will hold its 17th Annual Solar Boat Regatta on the beach from 10:00 am to 4:00 pm. See www.mnrenewables.org for more information.

Everyone can play a role in protecting our water resources. WaterFest 2010 will help families make the connection between activities in our neighborhoods and the health of local lakes, streams and wetlands.

This free event is also an opportunity to celebrate spring and enjoy one of the lakes that makes our area a great place to live!

For more information, call Louise Watson at 651-792-7956 or visit the website at www.rwmwd.org.