

UPDATE

HAS THE PROMISE OF THE STORIES WE'VE PUBLISHED TURNED INTO REALITY?



PHOTO BY SOGOLON DJATA

Earth Stewards remove non-native grasses for a pollution mitigation project at San Francisco's Lake Merced.

Post-Prison Garden Project Grows Earth Stewards

10 YEARS AGO ...

YES! published the story of the Garden Project (YES! Fall 2000). Cathrine Sneed, a counselor at the San Francisco County Jail, started a project in 1984 to connect inmates with the land by teaching them gardening. The prisoners gained self-respect, and many wanted to continue the work after their release. So, in 1992, Sneed started the Garden Project, which employed ex-prisoners to garden, plant trees, and landscape Bay Area public property. At the time of our story, participants tended a garden that produced food for low-income residents and had planted more than 7,000 trees on the streets of San Francisco.

TODAY ...

The Garden Project has expanded to reach out to at-risk youth as well as ex-prisoners. In October 2000, the project received an Oprah Winfrey "Use Your Life Award" of \$100,000 and a tractor for the garden. The inmate program closed in 2002 due to lack of staff and funds, so Sneed left her counseling job to focus on the Garden Project. The Sheriff's Department let her continue to use the jail's 12-acre farm plot.

Alumni have been the project's biggest evangelists, touting its transformational power to their friends and families. By 2004, relatives of former members were frequently turning to Sneed seeking jobs. So the Garden Project collaborated with the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission (SFPUC) and the Sheriff's Department to create Earth Stewards, which hired 12 at-risk young adults to remove invasive plants from city property and replant with native species. Stewards receive wages and health benefits, but Sneed believes the wisdom they gain about ecology, hard work, and interconnectedness is the real payoff.

"Doing this work empowers them," she says. "With just their hands they can make this huge difference. And they can see it."

In 2009, the San Francisco Housing Authority identified as potential troublemakers 80 young adults from its housing projects. Sneed hired them for a summer of hard work, including monthly week-long trips to Yosemite's Hetch Hetchy Valley, where the crew cleared an average of two miles of road each week in 100-degree temperatures. Sneed taught lessons on ecology, horticulture, and nutrition. Only three quit.

"She is able to take an entire childhood of positive role models, like most of us had, and squeeze it into six months to a year," says San Francisco Sheriff Michael Hennessey. "And she does it by being a combination of Mother Teresa and a drill sergeant."

When summer ended, some Earth Stewards headed back to school, but those who were beyond school age were unsure what to do next. Sneed convinced the SFPUC to extend employment for anyone who wanted to continue in the program.

Today there are 37 Earth Stewards and seven full-time Garden Project employees. The two programs work side by side on the jail's farm plot, which contains a vegetable garden and a native plant nursery grown from cuttings and seeds collected locally. In 2009, the garden produced more than 25 tons of vegetables for donation to groups serving indigent seniors and families, including Project Open Hand, the Alviar Mission Education Project, and the Double Rock Baptist Church. Sneed hopes to sell some produce to Stanford University's dining services in the coming year to raise funds for employee housing and other program costs.

—Berit Anderson

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