

Members of Black Urban Gardeners and Farmers, Allegheny County Conservation District and Phipps Conservatory, along with local volunteers, meet at a Homewood lot to plant two large pollinator gardens with flowers that will attract pollinators such as hummingbirds, bees, beetles and butterflies, which will help sustain the plant growth cycle.

**ENVIRONMENTAL
ACTIVISM IS TAKING ROOT IN
PITTSBURGH'S HOMEWOOD
NEIGHBORHOOD AS
RESIDENTS SEEK HEALTHIER
OPTIONS FOR THEIR HOMES,
FOOD AND COMMUNITY
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GROWING GREEN ACTIVISTS



Tinashe Chitiyo helps plant a welcome garden in the front of a lot on Monticello Street in Homewood.

At a happy hour reception on a windy March evening in Pittsburgh's East Liberty section, experienced public health researchers met 26 new allies: neighborhood recruits in the fight for safe, healthy communities.

The researchers from the national Cancer Free Economy Network came to study how Pittsburgh is confronting the deadly health effects of air pollution and lead exposures in its poorest neighborhoods. At the closing conference event, they met local volunteers with their own ideas on how to reverse their communities' odds.

The most recent graduates of the Homewood Children's Village Leadership Institute, a boot camp for budding activists, pitched three ideas to enlist their neighbors in healthier habits. They suggested trash cans in business districts, public education on cancer and obesity among adults, and information on childhood cancers. The presenters won small grants from the Cancer Free Economy group to implement their projects: an acknowledgment that progress in civic engagement begins with partnerships and concrete goals.

Chemical exposures and disease have been clearly linked. Regions with polluted air shoulder disproportionate levels of chronic illnesses like childhood asthma, diabetes and heart disease. The burden of disease is shockingly higher among African Americans than in whites. In one recent study, Dr. Sebat Erqou of the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine found that African Americans in the region face higher average exposures to fine particulate matter and black carbon in the air. He correlated the exposure to a 45 percent higher risk of cardiovascular disease.

Now, hard local data and community partnerships are helping neighbors in Homewood claim their rights to cleaner air, water and fresh local food. Air quality engineers, energy conservation experts, horticulturists and teenage activists are all part of the team.

The new partnerships are a natural extension of the work of the Homewood Children's Village, said Walter Lewis, the organization's president and CEO. Since 2010, the Village has developed a two-generation approach to renewing the eastern Pittsburgh neighborhood, with programs designed to advance solid education, strong families, good career opportunities, and improved child and community health.

HARD LOCAL DATA AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS ARE HELPING NEIGHBORS IN HOMEWOOD CLAIM THEIR RIGHTS TO CLEANER AIR, WATER AND FRESH LOCAL FOOD. AIR QUALITY ENGINEERS, ENERGY CONSERVATION EXPERTS, HORTICULTURISTS AND TEENAGE ACTIVISTS ARE ALL PART OF THE TEAM.

Environmental health underlies all those goals. The results of a local 2014 report funded by the National Institutes of Health proved that children exposed to Pittsburgh's industrial pollutants had high rates of chronic untreated asthma. One child's recurring asthma attacks can ripple through a family, causing siblings to miss school and parents to lose daily wages.

"It proved that many of our challenges aren't a matter of personal choice," Mr. Lewis said. "So we all have to be part of the solution."

Homewood's new environmental activists range from neighborhood matriarchs to high school students in the Junior Green Core. They have learned that heavy local traffic, train diesel exhaust, industrial toxins and crumbling homes challenge the whole community. Individuals can't clean the region's outdoor air quality overnight, but they can learn how to protect themselves from mold,

lead, radon, and pollutants that waft in through windows and crevices or leak in from pipes and cracks.

Rev. Dorothea Hall, one of the Village's leadership program graduates, grew up in Homewood. Now 64, she has returned to an apartment in a senior living complex, Homewood Station. The five-year-old building has new amenities like the street-level Everyday Café, but it's also close to fumes from the East Busway.

Building on the skills gained from the Leadership Institute, Rev. Hall has enrolled in a new citizen-science program to find out more about her indoor air quality. For three weeks, she will observe data from monitors recording her home's levels of carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, radon, temperature and humidity. The low-cost equipment is loaned by ROCIS—Reducing Outdoor Contaminants in Indoor Spaces—a regional initiative supported by The

Heinz Endowments.

Rev. Hall won one of the three Cancer Free Economy grants for her ideas on bringing cancer prevention tips to residents at local senior high-rises. She says the ROCIS project is a natural extension of that interest.

"I suppose I did it because I'm curious, especially since we have so many other health issues here—lead in the water, higher rates of cancer," she explained. After training to interpret her results, she plans to share her findings with resident councils in other senior living buildings and with her church community.

Other efforts to help make Homewood homes healthier include Grassroots Green Homes, which was launched in Homewood this

To extend the gardening season, Black Urban Gardeners and Farmers organized volunteers to build a hoop house on a Monticello Street lot in Homewood. Wadjet Mentuhotep, right, helps with constructing the structure of large hoops, which is later covered with heavy greenhouse plastic to protect young plants and to enable plant growth into the winter.



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spring with aid from the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency. The program has enabled residents in several Pittsburgh neighborhoods to save energy and remedy aging, unhealthy homes. The Heinz Endowments, which has helped to fund the Village's trainings for residents in environmental health and justice action, underwrote an overview of health policy issues related to homes for the group's parent, Conservation Consultants Inc., and provided support for the diagnostic, testing and mitigation tools that can be used inside living spaces.

Grassroots Green Homes puts those ideas into practice.

The initiative, funded by the Richard King Mellon Foundation, McCauley Ministries, PNC Charitable Trust and the Endowments, has been successful in the Pittsburgh neighborhoods of Oakland and Uptown. Three hundred Homewood households will receive small stipends to monitor energy use, while 20 will welcome contractors for weatherization and retrofits.

Along with aging infrastructure, Homewood contends with more than 700 vacant lots, more than any other city neighborhood. Community gardens can fight the blight, and groups like the Black Urban Gardeners (BUGS) have steadily increased their acreage in the past few seasons. BUGS' work has received funding from The Pittsburgh Foundation and in-kind support from the Allegheny County Conservation District.

This summer, Phipps Conservatory specialists helped BUGS members in expanding their efforts with help from an Endowments grant. They developed a business strategy and maximize their productivity on vacant lots on Monticello Street, a few steps from Pittsburgh Westinghouse Academy in Homewood. With a goal of eventually reclaiming 31,000 square feet on both sides of the block, the group farmed half the site—seven lots—this season, said project director Raqueeba Bey. The volunteers started seedlings in February for a cash crop of tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers and greens.

“Our farm stand onsite sells produce at low cost, and we want to start another farmers market, possibly at the local YMCA, once a month,” Ms. Bey said. “We have a hoop house [to protect young plants]. We have an herb garden, a pollinator garden, and even a chicken coop.”

Also nurturing the partnership between Phipps and BUGS is a new Pittsburgh program called Adopt a Lot, which permits residents to farm vacant lots owned by the city and the Urban Redevelopment Authority.

Director Shelly Danko+Day said that Homewood has adopted 28 lots in the community—“the most of any neighborhood in the city,” she asserted proudly. The new guidelines for the city's 30,000 vacant lots provide gardeners with a guaranteed right to maintain



gardens over multiple years and allow access to Pennsylvania Water and Sewer Authority water for irrigation.

Because lead levels in the soil are unacceptably high, BUGS farms in raised beds. Meanwhile, teen members of the Junior Green Corps planted sunflowers on the unfarmed Monticello lots to naturally decontaminate the soil. Supported by grants from the Endowments, the Corps also has planted 59 trees in Homewood over the past three years. The tree canopy mitigates pollution. The Green Corps meets year-round, earning stipends to work in afterschool learning programs as well as community gardens. In conservation classes, students from different areas as well as Homewood learned to use leaves as biomarkers in planning where the saplings were most needed.

Davon Crosby of Wilkinsburg joined the Corps at age 14, following his sister into the program. “She thought I’d like it,” said Davon, who will join the U.S. Navy this fall.

She was right. He particularly enjoyed the program’s field trips, including a visit to the Philadelphia Eagles’ home field. There, groundskeepers demonstrated how they maintain its natural turf and generate sustainable power from wind turbines.

The greening initiatives complement school and community-based efforts to address the scarcity of healthy food in Homewood.

Helen Faison Elementary and Westinghouse Academy participate in the Learning Gardens program. The Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh’s Healthy Cooking, Eating, and Growing Program (HCEG) brings young people and elders together to grow and cook food, and Westinghouse Academy offers culinary arts job-training curriculum.

“One of the key components of environmental justice is getting people to the table to speak for themselves,” explained Dr. Robert Bullard, a distinguished professor of urban planning and environmental policy at Texas Southern University in Houston and regarded as a founder of the environmental justice movement.

With youth, families and partners engaged in such efforts in their own neighborhood, Homewood is finding its voice. **h**