

In the fall of 2009, Tommy Callahan, Vice President for Paul Mitchell Systems, Inc.—and a son of the mountains himself—contacted the Loyal Jones Appalachian Center at Berea College on behalf of his boss, John Paul DeJoria. Moved by how the recession was affecting Americans, Mr. DeJoria wanted to help. But he didn't merely want to throw money at a problem. Rather, Mr. DeJoria wanted to empower people, to offer a hand up, not a hand out.

Through the pledged support of Mr. DeJoria and through conversations between the Loyal Jones Appalachian Center and area agencies, Grow Appalachia was born. After only one growing season, Grow Appalachia has quickly become a successful and welcome presence in the communities it serves.

The Grow Appalachia project began as a partnership among five groups: the Loyal Jones Appalachian Center, the Pine Mountain Settlement School, the Red Bird Mission, the Henderson Settlement and the Laurel County African American Heritage Center. To be successful, these groups agreed that they must capitalize on the intangible positives of the region, primarily an ethic and willingness to commit to hard work and a well-established network of community and faith groups, schools, and other organizations equipped to make the most of any opportunity.

With access to fresh, nutritious food an ongoing issue in rural mountain communities and with hunger an increasing outcome of the recession, the vision of Grow Appalachia quickly became one of reversing these trends. Tied to these issues were others that the partners hoped Grow Appalachia could help address, including the high rates of obesity, diabetes, and heart disease caused in part by the prevalence of highly processed foods. By creating community gardens and teaching people to grow their own food, the partners recognized the opportunity to reverse some of those patterns of loss in the region—the loss of gardening and food cultivation knowledge, as well as the decline in cooking and food preservation skills.

Due to Mr. DeJoria's generosity, Grow Appalachia was able to make serious capital investments. Site managers purchased many tools—including shovels, spades, trowels, and hoes—for the participating families, tools they could not otherwise afford. Tillers were procured for each site and flawlessly prepared the fertile, but rocky soil. Food preservation equipment—hot water bath and pressure canners, canning and kitchen tools, jars and lids—was purchased for the families to use. One participant cried when given a \$75 pressure canner. She had wanted one for years but had never been able to afford it. Now she had the ability to put up food for the winter.

In order to participate in the program and receive the tools and other equipment, each gardener was required to attend classes that taught effective and safe handling of the tools. To address the unknowns surrounding food production, gardeners were asked to keep thorough records throughout the season. Project staff also interviewed gardeners on-site and made calculations based on these visits and conversations.

By the end of August, Grow Appalachia had helped 96 families create garden plots.

In addition to the individual garden plots, communal gardens were created at four partner sites in Eastern Kentucky. These gardens were maintained by Grow Appalachia staff, employees of the partner programs, and community volunteers. Staff then distributed the produce grown in these communal plots to needy members of the community. Additionally, each site offered a series of classes on growing and preserving, classes taught mostly by county extension agents. Perhaps the most rewarding aspect of the educational programming was watching the participants actively teach each other.

While initial estimates of the project's potential impact were somewhat conservative, not even the most optimistic of program partners could have anticipated Grow Appalachia's immense success. All told, 300–400 people received assistance by growing gardens, attending heart-healthy cooking classes, or learning food preservation techniques. Because of the participating families' powerful desire to share the fruits of their labors with those around them at least 2,800 people received some amount of fresh produce from Grow Appalachia gardens.

By the end of the season, best estimates indicate that Grow Appalachia gardens raised nearly 120,000 pounds of fresh produce. The Grow Appalachia field staff estimates that while the fresh vegetables and herbs were welcome on the families' tables, just as important was the fact that one-half to two-thirds of the harvest was frozen, canned, or dried in preparation for the winter. The preserved beans, tomatoes, corn, sauerkraut and pickles have been like gold in an economy as challenging as Central Appalachia's. Based solely on the monetary value of the vegetables produced, preserved, and distributed, the program was an enormous success. The cost of the vegetables raised was \$1.25 a pound, which is significantly less than market prices for produce of this quality.

In the second year, all of the partner sites from the first season are back, and the program is expanding to help serve the St. Vincents' Mission in Floyd County, Kentucky, the LMU Organic Gardening Project in Harrogate, Tennessee, and High Rocks for Girls in Greenbrier and Pocahontas counties, West Virginia. All told, 14 counties in four states and more than 260 families will be members of Grow Appalachia. Many tons of fresh, nutritious food will be placed on the tables and in the pantries of these hardworking folks, as they are reconnected to their communities, neighbors, and the skills necessary to feed themselves.

Grow Appalachia, in helping mountain families to acquire those tools and skills which lead to greater food security, has created that elusive "hand up, not a hand out" so often referred to and so seldom seen.