As you turn the corner of West Rowan Avenue onto North Alberta Street in Northwest Spokane, you see a curious phenomenon in the yard of Shadle Park Presbyterian Church. Where there once was a lawn there is now a vegetable patch, and the sign welcoming parishioners is instead welcoming community members to get their hands dirty this summer with urban farming. Johnny Edmondson, the Family Ministries Director at Shadle Park, has a sustained passion for growing and sharing food, one that he hopes to open to his wider community through his parish’s new Growing Neighbors initiative. This program is geared towards increasing access to fresh fruits and vegetables throughout Northwest Spokane, building stronger relationships within the Shadle Park community, and teaching community members the importance of becoming better stewards through gardening.

Johnny’s enthusiasm for Growing Neighbors’ pilot year is reflected in his community, where there are currently twelve active, volunteer-run ‘farmyards.’ The farmyards function like community gardens, where volunteers meet to plant, attend to, and eventually harvest vegetables and fruit. What makes these farmyards unique is their location: individuals’ back, and sometimes, front yards. These uncommon community spaces innately create room for volunteers to forge personal connections, and may have contributed to their popularity. Amazingly, Johnny already has had to create a waitlist for future farmyards.

Another element that contributed to the success of Growing Neighbors’ preliminary year lies in Johnny’s willingness to engage all members and organizations within his community. He’s presented the Growing Neighbors program at the Shadle Public Library and in front of his Neighborhood Council. Additionally, Growing Neighbors has fostered relationships with local schools, the North Spokane YMCA, students from Whitworth University, and WSU Extension. By utilizing grassroots organizing techniques, Johnny is touching the lives of his community at scale.

The breadth of Johnny’s reach also stems from the heart of his mission: “Really the end goal of the whole thing is helping neighbors connect with each other and start functioning more like extended family instead of like strangers who are competing for limited resources.” Growing Neighbors invites compassion and cultivates dignity by creating space for community members, regardless of their background, to engage in meaningful relationship building. And, as Johnny noted with a smile, “urban farming isn’t new, feeding the hungry isn’t new, helping neighbors get to know each other isn’t new, but it’s really trying to bring some of those pieces together.” What Growing Neighbors demonstrates is the space, and the hunger, within communities for public gardening initiatives. If there’s dirt, water, and seeds available the only other thing you need is able hands and open minds.

To learn more about the Growing Neighbors program, visit https://growingneighbors.org/