Notes from the Field
New Programs, New Partners, Original Mission
By Rachel Ryan

With a growing interest to address the nutritional needs of the food-insecure population on Vashon Island, the Vashon-Maury Community Food Bank and Vashon’s Food Access Partnership are developing new programming to increase access to local produce. The pilot initiative, aptly coined Harvest for Vashon, is headed up by Sam Carp, the organizations’ first year Harvest Against Hunger VISTA. Carp will oversee a “Donation Station” at the local farmers market, organize Island gleans, and promote “grow-a-row” with Island gardeners.

Vashon Island, nestled between the Kitsap Peninsula and mainland Washington, is most commonly known as a summer vacation destination and an enclave for the wealthy. However, about 1-in-10 islanders rely on the only local food bank, the Vashon-Maury Community Food Bank, to meet their monthly food needs. While the food bank has had a community garden for multiple years, and while SNAP recipients have been encouraged to use Fresh Bucks at the farmers market, clients that desire fresh produce still find it out of reach. To help combat this issue, the Vashon-Maury Community Food Bank and the Vashon Island Food Access Partnership, a program of the Vashon Island Growers Association, applied to host a Harvest Against Hunger VISTA. Sam Carp, the first year VISTA, is determined to develop projects that build community-wide awareness around equitable food-access, local agriculture, and island stewardship.

When Carp first started his term in November, he was overwhelmed by potential program ideas. After a few months of juggling a multitude of possibilities, Carp quickly learned that trying to do too much at once would decrease the quality of his overall work. Instead, Carp decided to cut back and focus on three new programs: implementing a ‘donation station’ at the Island’s farmers market; building a community of Island gleaners; and activating a network of “grow-a-row” gardeners. When deciding which projects to move forward, Carp had two main criteria: grassroots projects that could be sustained by volunteers, and initiatives that would most quickly amplify access to fresh produce. Capacity is an especially important consideration for Carp, since after the three-year grant with Rotary First Harvest, the projects developed will need to live on within the community and without a full-time volunteer project manager. Carp began building the programs by “identifying clear need in the community, laying out a clear strategy for how to address that need, and laying out the steps that it’s going to take to solve the problem that needs addressing.” Additionally, when deciding which ideas to move forward, Carp wanted to be sure he could identify a clear “Why” behind how they fit in to the larger missions of his two sponsor sites. Once he landed on the “Why” he was able to start moving forward.
The donation stations, gleaning program, and “grow-a-row” projects all involve capturing the abundance of seasonally available food on Vashon. Because of this, Carp aptly named this new trifecta Harvest for Vashon. As Carp noted, “Branding makes it more relatable.” By creating a place-based brand for his programs, Carp hopes that their will be more community buy-in and cross-pollination of volunteer groups. Carp explained, “I wanted to be able to associate each program with one another. They’re not necessarily mutually exclusive, and they all benefit each other in different ways.” Another way Carp is working towards amplifying the Brand on (and off) the Island is by working with local artists to create compelling brand visuals. Carp believes that this work, like the programs themselves, will create mutually-beneficial connections between the artists, Harvest for Vashon, and the Island community.

Though only a few months old, Harvest for Vashon is already sprouting a movement on the Island. By using the existing momentum of the Island’s rich agricultural history, Carp is hopeful that the community will see value in and a connection with his programs. The culture of appreciation for sustainable communities and local agriculture also situates Harvest for Vashon in a fertile landscape of potential partners. Many existing Island organizations have expressed interest in collaborating with Harvest for Vashon to work towards their common goal: breaking down existing emotional and financial barriers to ensure all Vashon residents have access to locally grown and nutritionally dense foods. Another goal of Harvest for Vashon is to, “engage the entire Vashon community in decreasing the amount of wasted food we produce, while at the same time destigmatizing the use of food banks and other kinds of social aid.” While ambitious, Carps sees these goals as attainable, especially through collaborative efforts. As Carp puts it, “Through partnerships, a nonprofit is able to focus on their mission while also addressing other needs in the community. These may not be directly related to what they’re doing, but they affect the overall wellbeing and sovereignty of people they’re working with.”

Carp sees the relationships made through Harvest for Vashon as movement facilitators. By bringing organizations, individuals, and now schools into his work, Carp hopes to plant the seeds for lasting impact during his VISTA term. Luckily, he’s found that on the small island community word of mouth seems to be the most effective tool in consciousness raising. As a tribute to the work he’s already done, Carp has formalized partnerships with the following organizations: Vashon Island Land Trust; Vashon School District; Vashon Master Gardeners; Vashon Island Fruit Club; Vashon Island Garden Club; and the Interfaith Council to Prevent Homelessness. While each partnership adds something unique to the work, Carp plans to build out the relationships to create certain tangible outcomes. For example, it’s his hope that the connection with the Master Gardeners will lead to educational materials for food pantry clients around growing and cooking fresh foods. On the other side of the coin, Carp’s partnerships with the local schools are allowing him to teach children about the entire food system – from planting a seed to community food security. Carp is continually humbled by the Vashon Island Community and their willingness to engage with him. As Carp puts it, “This work has been ridiculously rewarding so far. I feel lucky to work not only with food, but also with people and how they connect and how it can bring people closer together.”

For more information about starting or developing your farm-to-food bank initiative, please email growingconnections@northwestharvest.org.