



2020 IMPACT REPORT



2020 marked a decade since nine local human service agencies came together to respond to the high rates of childhood obesity and hunger present in our region, forming Project GROWS. Over the years we've worked to create fun and engaging spaces for discovery, to build knowledge, and to develop skills for growing healthy youth and families over time.

The pandemic has underscored the work still to be done in food security, access, and equity. We are keenly reminded that working to address public health requires challenging and re-envisioning social and economic systems—that many of the realities our youth face are often rooted in unjust and inequitable policies that have persisted for generations. This year has indeed been a journey of candid reflection and discernment for our organization, challenging us to be creative in carrying out our work with and through youth and their families. We hope that the names, faces, and stories shared in the following report reflect our relationship-based approach and demonstrate our values, commitments, and care for the long-term health and wellness of our communities.

Growing healthy youth in the next decade will require continued passion, humility, and the courage to reimagine and renew our founding vision to be an inclusive and equitable resource rooted in and of the communities of the Central Shenandoah Valley. Join us in celebrating the journey thus far. Join us in sustaining your gifts in support of this continued good work!

With gratitude,  
The Project GROWS team



## Our Team



CHELSEA deROCHMONT  
Education Intern



CLARA METZLER  
Director of Community Engagement



ERIKA DABNEY  
Summer Staff



HANNAH TOPCZEWSKI  
Digital Media & Marketing Intern



KATIE STANKARD  
Spring Farm Intern



LAURA FAIRCLOTH  
Director of Farm Operations



MARIN LAFRANKIE  
Food Access Intern



MEGAN MARSHALL  
Director of Food Access



NATALIE PAX  
Food Access Assistant & AMI Community Action Fellow



NICHOLE BARROWS  
Director of Education



NOLAN ZEMANSKI  
Fall Farm Staff



PATRICIA-MARIE HARLEY  
Farm to School Intern



RACHAEL BERRY  
Food Access Intern



RACHEL SMITH  
Food Access Intern



RHEANNON FULTZ  
Summer Youth Staff



TAMARA POWELL  
Farm to School Intern



THOMAS PEERY  
Garden Educator Intern



TIFFANY HOLLIDAY  
Farm Ergonomics Consultant, Mary Baldwin University



TOM BRENNEMAN  
Executive Director



WILL BARDEN  
Farm Production Apprentice & AMI Community Action Fellow

Project GROWS is an educational, nonprofit organization with a mission to improve the health of children and youth in Staunton, Waynesboro, and Augusta County, Virginia through garden-based education and access to healthy food.

## Our Board

*We have to teach the children to lead us out of this divided world.*

- DAVID GEIMAN, Board Member



ANN LEFEVE SNYDER



DAVID GEIMAN  
Treasurer



DEBORAH BUNDY-CARPENTER



JAMES GOALDER  
President



KENDRICK KIER



PATTY SECHI



SHANA MEGANCK



SOFIE CANTELL LAMBERT



SUSAN M. PERELES

*My commitment to the mission of Project Grows aligns with my personal passion to educate our next generation about their food and introduce their young palates to really good food.*

- DEBORAH BUNDY-CARPENTER, Board Member

## Outgoing Board

DAMON STRICKLAND • GRACE SCHULTZ  
NELL DESMOND • TONY DAVENPORT

## Accessible Food Systems

The pandemic has laid bare the vulnerabilities of our global food system, generating renewed interest in our local food systems. Our interdependencies are more apparent than ever before, and so in a year filled with cancellations and postponements, we committed to keeping our farmers markets open and supporting the food access work undertaken by nutrition staff in the schools. At our markets, we worked with partners, new and longstanding, to offer online and in-person shopping. And you—our producers, customers, and volunteers—stepped up and offered support. YOU continued to grow and market your products, YOU put your SNAP-EBT dollars into local food and YOU helped staff curbside pickup at our markets!



## • Staunton City Schools Spotlight •

The pandemic has forced every institution to change how they operate. But for those in the community who feed our children, like Amanda Warren, that transition had to happen quickly and effectively. She's the director of school nutrition at **Staunton City Schools**. All six schools in the division provide free breakfast and lunch to their 2,800 students, as many of them rely on those meals to get enough to eat. In March 2020, within two days of the schools shutting down, "we were operating emergency feeding, because we knew that kids were unexpectedly now without meals," Warren said. "Throughout this whole process, Project GROWS was there with us."

Project GROWS staff and interns jumped in alongside the school staff to prepare meals, pack them onto buses for delivery, and distribute them at curbside pickup sites. Later in the year, Project GROWS also helped connect Warren with local farms to provide fresh, bulk produce to local families through a grant from the **Mid-Atlantic Food Access and Resilience Coalition**.

The organization is also making plans to safely bring back the **Harvest of the Month** program, in which Project GROWS staff introduce kids to vegetables they may not have tried before. The kids then get to pass their judgement on lightly steamed green beans, sweet, raw carrots, or whatever else is in season that month.

Warren remembers the day that golden beets were on the menu. As one child bit into the beet, "their eyes just got so big—they were like, 'I didn't think it would taste like that!'" Warren said. "That's the hardest part, is bridging that little threshold with kids, because trying new things is scary." She said the kids get especially excited when they get to try something that they helped plant or harvest on a field trip to the Project GROWS farm.

"When the kids have their hands on something, they're so much more eager to try it," Warren said. "If you don't connect kids to the food that's making their bodies strong and making them healthier individuals, they're not going

to eat it." That connection isn't just a perk of the program; it's crucial to bridge the gaps to food access.

"If, in the end, we've put all the best nutritionally sound foods in reach, and we've strengthened our local food systems by procuring these goods, but children and families don't choose to eat it, our work is mostly diminished and it becomes unsustainable," Warren said. "This is why it's so exciting when a child tries a Harvest of the Month veggie—exposure leads to trying, trying leads to choosing, choosing leads to—asking for it at home. This changes parents' buying behaviors and potentially opens doors that ultimately can change whole families' health and community health."

In addition to introducing the kids to new vegetables, it also establishes relationships between the schools and local farmers, so that schools purchase more local foods and farmers have a consistent outlet for their produce. One of the organization's newest partners in this program is **Singing Earth Produce** in Waynesboro, run by father-and-son team, Adolfo and Ernesto Calixto. Ernesto Calixto said they'll be providing popular veggies that don't require much preparation once they arrive at the schools, like greens and cherry tomatoes. But when he says cherry tomatoes, he means a delightful mix of eight different varieties of cherries. "You've got the grape ones, one's

*I literally squealed with delight when I saw the beautiful turnips you gave us at the YMCA school meal pick up! Thank you!!!*

- PARENT FROM CURBSIDE SCHOOL MEAL PICKUP

really small, and then a yellow pear, a red pear, and there's a brown pear, and there's a pink one, too!" Calixto said. Singing Earth Produce also sells to retail stores and farmers markets, including the **Waynesboro Farmers Market**, which Project GROWS manages. But Calixto hopes he'll still have time to visit the schools this year.

Getting to talk to a real life farmer is a key part of the Harvest of the Month program. Cathy Marsh, a marketing strategist for **Letterpress Communications**, said her two sons, Will and Louie, come home talking about the veggies they tried in school that day. "It becomes like a competition between their friends: did you like it or did you not like it?" Marsh chuckled. "I think it's incredibly valuable to learn about fresh eating and local eating, what they're putting in their bodies and where it's coming from."

The taste testing isn't just about getting the students to try a new food; the Project GROWS staff make sure it's a fun, interactive event in the middle of a school day. "The fact that it's not just being served to them, but that someone's actually coming in makes a big difference—it's exciting," Marsh said.

• By Randi B. Hagi

## 2020 Market Highlights

- 70 market customers used SNAP-EBT benefits to purchase food at our farmers markets
- 17% of total vendor sales included nutrition incentives (SNAP & WIC/Senior vouchers) thanks to help from Virginia Fresh Match, Virginia Program for Aging Services, and the Staunton-Augusta Health Department
- 200 hours donated by volunteers at our farmers markets

## 2020 School Highlights

- DONATED 498 pounds of hakurei turnips, radishes, and spinach to Staunton City Schools for free curbside school meal pickups
- VOLUNTEERED over 150 hours for Staunton City Schools' curbside meal distributions
- SERVED 4,950 samples of Harvest of the Month vegetables at 9 schools across Staunton and Waynesboro, including swiss chard, kale, winter squash, and potatoes



# Food & Environmental Education

*In a typical year, Project GROWS delivers in-person garden-based education on our farm and in the community to over 4,000 youth. In 2020, it was nearly impossible for kids to come to us; instead, we drew on our creativity, the strengths of our staff, and our collaborative partnerships to find ways to bring farm, food, and environmental education to them.*

*Our education team became amateur videographers seemingly overnight, producing educational videos in lieu of field trips, along with downloadable scavenger hunts and worksheets. Together with our partners in education and youth development, we launched two series on our blog and [YouTube channel](#)—Signs of Spring and Super Summer Chefs—bringing students lessons on plant identification as well as how to grow, harvest, and cook seasonal veggies.*

*We wrapped up the year with a virtually-adapted Harvest of the Month program, bringing more faces and places from within our network of local growers to our young viewing audiences who tasted prepared harvest delights—super greens, winter squash, and potatoes—at monthly curbside school meal pickups in Staunton and Waynesboro. A taste of normal, we hope, in a very unusual year.*



## • Boys & Girls Club Spotlight •

Since Project GROWS' inception, one of their stalwart partners in furthering food and environmental education has been the Boys & Girls Club of Waynesboro, Staunton, & Augusta County, which provides afterschool and summer programming to 36 local kids and teens. "I think our programs are so harmonious," executive director Annie Sachs said. "They're essential to what the club does."

This work has continued during the pandemic through the Young Chefs program. During this three-week series, Project GROWS educators bring in produce and walk the kids—decked out in chef's aprons and face masks—through delicious recipes. Sometimes the young protégés get to work with tomatoes or greens or other veggies that they themselves helped plant or harvest on a field trip to the GROWS farm.

Sachs said this program has been particularly valuable now, when many of

the kids are in virtual school during the day. "For them to have this experience in the real, tactile world, with trusted, familiar staff and leaders from Project GROWS has been comforting and joyous, but also something that they're bound to remember," she said. "Maybe now more than ever, those familiar faces and that personal interaction is really, really important."

She's seen that, when kids learn about nutrition through personal interaction, it's much more likely they will go on to make healthy eating choices outside of the club. And while the very popular Youth-Run Farm Stand had to go on hiatus last year because of COVID-19, Project GROWS did continue delivering produce to the club each week for the kids to snack on. They also got to take extras home. "There's a very unique and direct route that the club offers into the lives of, not only the kids that we serve, but also their families as well," Sachs said.

• By Randi B. Hagi

<https://www.projectgrows.org/2020/10/harvest-of-the-month-super-greens/>



*On a scale of one to one thousand, I'd give it a one thousand. I've already had five cups!*

- 5TH GRADE PARTICIPANT IN YOUNG CHEFS



Photo by Chris Lassiter

## 2020 Education Highlights

- PRODUCED 17 educational videos, including 2 Spanish language videos, with over 1,800 views
- HOSTED 3 field trips serving 35 students, including teens from the YMCA's Youth Volunteer Corps
- TAUGHT 3 cooking classes to elementary and middle school students at the Boys & Girls Club
- DELIVERED Harvest of the Month programming online reaching students across Waynesboro and Staunton with 3 videos featuring different local farmers, types of produce, and guided at-home activities
- PARTNERED with health professions programs at Mary Baldwin University's Murphy Deming College of Health Sciences to plan how to make our field trips and farm spaces more accommodating for people of all ages and abilities

# HARVEST OF THE MONTH OCTOBER



*What fun to open our Project GROWS video from school and find a dear friend! So fun and informative!*

- LACEY SPRING ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PARENT



## The Farm at Project GROWS

For almost a decade, the Project GROWS farm has been a place of connection and a source of nourishment for the community. In 2020, when in-person connection paused, the produce itself became our touchpoint to the community. We asked ourselves at the beginning of the pandemic, “What is essential?” Our community quickly showed us that the farm, plants, and produce we grow are essential. We saw record sales at our annual plant sale and an increased demand for our produce across all outlets. Our Community Supported Agriculture program grew by 50%, we provided produce for emergent community initiatives such as [Augusta Health’s Crop to Community Program](#) and [Martha’s Meals on Wheels of Staunton](#), we saw record sales at the [Farmer’s Market @ the Health Department](#), and requests for donations poured in from organizations across our region.



## • Staunton-Augusta Health Department Spotlight •

Back in 2014, Diane Hawkins, a WIC\* nutritionist with the **Staunton-Augusta Health Department**, noticed a problem with their **Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program**. They were giving out vouchers to their clients that could be used to purchase fresh produce at farmer’s markets, but a lot of the clients weren’t using them. Hawkins and her team realized it was because many of the mothers’ schedules or transportation situations didn’t allow them to get to a farmer’s market. “They already have to go to doctor’s appointments, and the grocery store, maybe social services, and here we’re asking them to make another trip,” Hawkins said. Her team asked, “how can we make it easier for them?”

had expertise in managing farmers markets, and their vision aligns very closely with our vision ... improving the health of children and families.”

Last year, in response to the pandemic, Project GROWS helped the health department set up drive-through farmer’s markets, where clients looked over a menu of the produce available. Project GROWS and their farmer partners then loaded up their vehicles with the desired fruits and veggies. “Our clients really appreciated being able to keep their young children in the cars—and that they could get that fresh produce in an easy method,” Hawkins said.



So in 2016, with the help of Project GROWS, they began hosting a farmer’s market right at the health department, where clients were already coming for other services. It has been a smashing success—this past growing season, they had an 84% voucher redemption rate, the highest in the state—which translated to about 500 women and children getting fresh produce.

Despite the obstacles the pandemic posed, the partnership with the health department and Project GROWS continued to strengthen, and the market was able to step in and provide a source of food for families when food insecurity was at an all-time high.

*\*WIC stands for the federal Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children; which provides funds and services to pregnant women and young families for supplemental foods, health care referrals, and nutrition education.*

The partnership “has surpassed any of our expectations for how it would go,” Hawkins said. “We knew Project GROWS

• By Randi B. Hagi



### 2020 Farm Highlights

- GREW over 15,000 pounds and 191,900 servings of produce on the farm, an increase of 19%
- SOLD 1,100 pounds of produce to schools across Staunton & Waynesboro, an increase of 200%
- PROVIDED food for 30 local families through our Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, including 4 shares purchased by the Faith Community Nursing (FCN) network of Augusta Health
- MADE first ever sales of fresh produce to the Boys & Girls Club, including 15 individual sales of lunchbox peppers, carrots, sugar snap peas, and cucumbers
- DONATED 2,100 pounds of produce to local hunger relief organizations and low-income senior housing facilities, an increase of 18%
- SOLD a record \$5,655 of produce to low-income families using WIC benefits at The Farmers Market @ the Health Department



*After receiving weekly produce through our CSA program, 72% of families were able to eat more fruits and vegetables each day!*

- FAITH COMMUNITY NURSING SURVEY

*I took a couple bags of the turnips and cooked them up for my family the other day and they were DELICIOUS!*

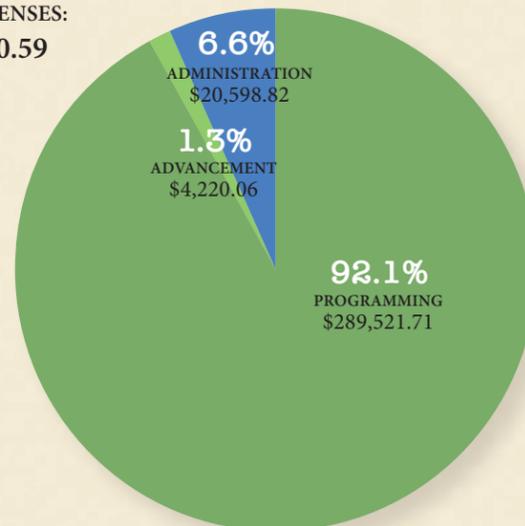
- CAFETERIA MANAGER IN STAUNTON CITY SCHOOLS

# Financials

Our resilience and our means to impact our communities in this unique year was made possible through the trust, generous support, and partnership of individuals, families, corporations, foundations and governmental agencies at the local, state and federal level.

## EXPENSES

TOTAL EXPENSES:  
\$314,340.59



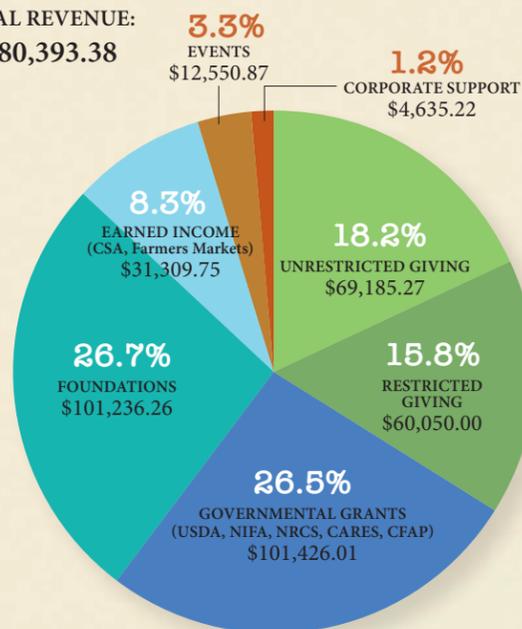
Since its founding in 2010, Project GROWS has received the generous support and counsel of regional foundations who remain a core base of our support, and we are grateful for their visionary leadership.



Project GROWS is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization registered with the Office of Charitable and Regulatory Programs, Virginia Department of Agricultural and Consumer Services. EIN 46-1070735.

## REVENUE

TOTAL REVENUE:  
\$380,393.38



Individual donor giving increased by 24.7% in 2020!

# Philanthropy Partners & Volunteers

Over the last decade, hundreds of volunteers have donated thousands (if not tens of thousands!) of hours to our organization, gifts of time and talent from our community which have made our work possible. Although we suspended many of our volunteer opportunities in 2020 due to the pandemic, we are grateful to the 44 volunteers who generously donated over 1,585 hours of service at our markets, for school programming, and on the farm!



Photo by Chris Lassiter

## • RZ Foundation Spotlight •

Tikkun olam is a Jewish concept that most closely translates to “make the world heal,” as Diana Black, a board member with the RZ Foundation, explained. “You are put on this earth, and during your time there, you should do as much as you can to leave it better than you found it.” It’s one of her family’s guiding principles, and part of why they’re financial supporters of Project GROWS.

“I was particularly impressed by their programs for children, their summer camps, and their collaborations with the schools,” Black said. She also appreciated the Project GROWS programs that reach senior citizens, like their partnerships with the Valley Program for Aging Services and the Staunton-Augusta Health Department. “Anybody who’s vulnerable, we want to feed them,” Black said.

The RZ Foundation is based in northern Virginia, although Black is a Staunton resident. Her grandmother, Rose Zafren, established the trust that became the foundation’s pool of distribution funds before her death in 2003 “with the hope that their descendants could continue to do

good in the areas that they were passionate about.” The foundation is “committed to ameliorating suffering, protecting natural resources, and correcting inequity of all varieties,” Black said, which includes improving access to wholesome food.

Zafren herself had more than just a green thumb, Black said, “it was like her whole body was green.” She’s the one who passed on to Black a love of growing things, teaching her the names of herbs and flowers. Then, after reading the book *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* by Barbara Kingsolver, Black became convinced that “the most effective means of activism for most people is in terms of their food choices. I thought it was particularly important to bring communities into that mindset in a place that is such an agricultural breadbasket as the Shenandoah Valley,” she said. This mindset was yet another reason Black chose to support Project GROWS, because “we’re all part of this community that shares its bounty with each other.”

• By Randi B. Hagi



# Looking Ahead in 2021

## YOUTH LEADERS IN AG

Augusta County is one of the top two agricultural-producing regions in the commonwealth. Still, we know through many intentional conversations with school leaders and students that racial, gender, and economic injustices influence who has access to land, farming knowledge, and careers in agriculture.

With this in mind, we are pleased to announce the launch of Youth Leaders in Agriculture (YLA), in partnership with school guidance counselors, teachers, and instructional staff in Staunton City Schools.

This career education initiative will prioritize high school-age youth from low-income communities and communities of color, teaching them skills in farming, leadership, and entrepreneurship. YLA will directly benefit students and the broader community through mentorship and hands-on learning, greater food access, food and environmental education, and vocational training. High school juniors will begin with a 140-hour academic mentorship for course credit on the Project GROWS farm, and will then be eligible to apply for a 280-hour paid internship for course credit over the summer growing season and into the fall semester of their senior year. Students will participate in farm work and leadership development workshops, engage in lessons on permaculture and agroecology, assist with K-12 food education for younger students, and take field trips into the community to learn about careers in our local food system.



[projectgrows.org](http://projectgrows.org)

MAILING ADDRESS

Project GROWS  
PO Box 781  
Staunton, VA 24402

FARM ADDRESS

The Farm at Project GROWS  
608 Berry Farm Road  
Verona, VA 24482

*Youth Leaders in Agriculture is underwritten by the Community Impact Grant Program for Education and Career Mentoring by the United Way of Staunton, Augusta and Waynesboro with support from the JustPax Fund and Schowalter Foundation.*