

Planting Trees and Forging Bonds with The Giving Grove

ARTICLE LISA ALLEN | PHOTOGRAPHY PROVIDED

I thought of countless ways to start this article. The old ‘teach a man to fish’ saying seemed plausible if I swapped ‘plant a tree’ for fishing. So did the tired ‘an apple a day keeps the doctor away’ adage.

Problem is, those words are trite. They don’t do justice to the work that’s happening every day, right here in our own communities, to provide fresh fruit to those who are hungry and worried about their next meal and at the same time empowering them to change their circumstances by investing their time in a little orchard.

Though The Giving Grove, an affiliate of the Kansas City Community Garden, is a non-profit organization that focuses on self-help and educational assistance to low-income residents to grow their own food—specifically apples, nuts and berries—this article isn’t just about apples. It’s about what the apples mean not only to the people who can pluck them from the branch and eat them, but for those who help clear

the trash, prime the soil, dig the holes and nurture the plants from seedling to tree. This is about the primal connection that food creates for families and about how, when communities come together in the pursuit of a common goal, the landscape can change in more ways than one.

Executive Director Robert Reiman has an arsenal of statistics at his disposal. One in five children in the state of Kansas lives in a food insecure home. The numbers are higher in Missouri: the state has the fifth highest rate of child food insecurity. For the quarter of a million people affected in the Kansas City metro area, food insecurity means a marked decline in economic opportunity, productivity and academic achievement and studies have shown that proper nutrition in the first three years of life makes a profound impact in the lives of children and their families.



Reiman had retired after a 27-year career as a principal at Deloitte Consulting and was focused on an environmental ministry at his church when he was approached by former Kansas State Representative

Jill Quigley, who connected him to Kevin Birzer, Greg Finkle and Ray Makalous of the Church of the Resurrection. Reiman has grown fruit in his own backyard for more than 10 years, and the men shared a desire to create a sustainable, organic option to help the food insecure population of Kansas City.

“We know there are backpack programs and other initiatives to help,” says Reiman. “But we saw a need for non-processed foods and wanted to fill that gap with an option that would be available even if backpacks were no longer being sent home with students. We started with a ‘kick the tires’ workshop because we needed to test the idea before we got too far into the process. The strong support we found inspired me to better understand food insecurity, and I got really jazzed about the idea of not just providing food, but of coaching people in neighborhoods that

are most affected how to grow their own food, and in teaching kids where their food is coming from.”

The Giving Grove’s model is an inclusive one. Though it grew from connections of faith, the organization is ecumenical and strives to complement, rather than compete with, other organizations. The difference is that The Giving Grove focuses on little orchards both for fresh produce and to strengthen the bonds between residents in each community.

“It seems simple enough, to plant a tree,” says Reiman, “but it can be dicey. Not all trees are created equal, and there are issues like disease resistance and ease of maintenance to consider. Education is an important component in the success of each little orchard.”

The organization requires that at least two people commit to each project. These people must be from different families, and must learn to care for the newly planted trees not only by scouting regularly for disease but also by maintaining the area in which the trees are planted.

“I have so many stories,” says Reiman, as he talks about how various Kansas City communities have embraced The Giving Grove’s mission.

There was one steward at the Wyandotte Countians Against Crime neighborhood who told Reiman ‘I can’t grow dirt, but I think we can do better’ as they discussed the crime rate and how the area looked more like a dumping ground than a place in which to raise a family.

“There was another time we were out around Tenth and Newton,” says Reiman. “The neighborhood didn’t know that we’d be there planting, as it was a faith-based food pantry that procured the rights to a piece of property and started the project. We show up and start planting, and about an hour into it I look across the street and see a door open just a crack, with a woman watching us. So I walked over and I introduced myself. She asked what we were doing, and I said ‘We’re planting this for you. This is your orchard.’”

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“Thing is, when it’s their orchard it’s more than just food. It’s also a chance for them to work together to make their neighborhood stronger,” says Reiman.

The Giving Grove is three planting seasons old. The original goal was to have planted five little orchards in 2013. They did 21. By the end of this spring’s planting season, they had 38 edible tree gardens sprinkled across the Kansas City metro area.

“We can plant twice a year,” he says, “in April and fall. Spring planting needs to be done by about May 10, but we get a little bit more time in the fall, sometimes through November, depending on the weather.”

The organization is committed to digging holes and planting by hand whenever possible, so as to minimize the negative effects

of heavy machinery on the land. Extra hands are always welcome, says Reiman, especially when The Giving Grove is serving a more senior neighborhood.

“We’re trying to make as great an impact as rapidly as possible” says Reiman. The focus in the off-season is to queue up the next season’s projects, continue to improve operations and to educate stewards about maintaining a healthy orchard and the importance of patience.

“Trees need three to five years in the ground to produce fruit,” he says. “For berry bushes, however, we see fruit in year two. As we move forward, we’ll be thinking through the stewards’ role in distributing the food, how to preserve the fruit post-season and how we can continue to create community through the little orchards.”

To learn more about or volunteer with The Giving Grove, visit GivingGrove.org.



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