

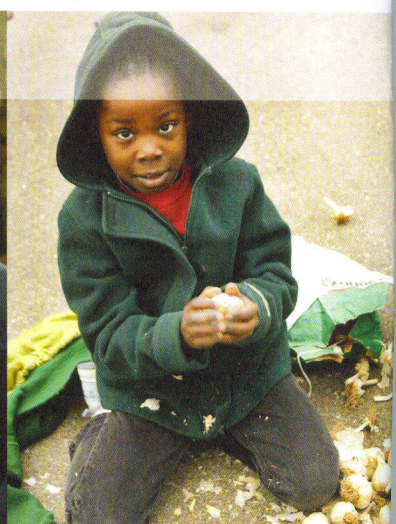


“The Magical Pea Patch”

A Great Outdoors story, told by Brother Rick Samyn of the Capuchin Soup Kitchen, a Leadership Grant recipient for the “Growing Healthy Kids” urban garden program.

It's all about relationships, isn't it? We are all part and parcel of the world around us, an environment which molds us into its design. We call it our home, this inner-city, a world of asphalt and stone; broken glass and broken dreams. It's a place where tender children “suit-up” in tough exteriors and so often succumb to the hard world around them – childhood lost and dreams never dreamt. Troubled places and troubled kids, with no room to run, no sanctuary – no place to discover themselves and to live their dreams.

“Jake” is a local kid who has been labeled by his mother as “hyperactive,” seemingly not able to focus on anything but following the wrong crowd and getting in fights with other kids. He so wants to fit in. As a Growing Healthy Kids (GHK) kid, he has had difficulties. His concentration is shot. To get his attention you have to hold his head toward you and say, “Jake...Jake! Look into my eyes, Jake...listen.” This was our basic mode of communication, painfully sad. But Jake really wanted to belong, to fit in.



Successful outdoor programs also require careful planning, patience...and perseverance!

Well, seeds need to be planted and the GHK farmwork needs doing. Tasks are assigned and the kids go to work. Alongside them, we help and observe. Our growing season starts as most others do, getting those seedling trays seeded with tomatoes and such. As we were hard at work, there was Jake, quite focused, no fighting, seeding away and doing a good job! Had he latched onto something he could do? Was he to be our "ace seeder"?

Weeks and months passed, and Jake continued to attend GHK. Troubles persisted. His attendance was peppered with "time-outs" and the occasional loss of the privilege to attend GHK for a week. His hyperactivity played out time and again with nasty looks and confrontations with other kids. But he kept getting on that old church van, heading for GHK! I really began to love that little kid – he kept trying.

As the seasons changed and years passed, Jake began to own GHK and our little urban farm. He was getting seasoned: A greenhorn at age 6, but now an old buck at 8! Jake always tried real hard to keep those hands busy and his mind focused. Pea-picking was a hit with him. He had his hands and mind on-task when it came to peas. On one pea-picking occasion, as Jake ran up and down the pea bed with his bucket, he suddenly stopped in his tracks and blurted out, "I never thought that pea-picking would be so much fun!" I knew at that moment Jake felt at home and was happy. Something good happened in that pea patch.

It is simple and direct: Environmental spaces do matter and have a profound effect on the hearts and dreams of children. As adults, we often reflect on those pivotal life-changing events in our lives as children. Now, as "grown-ups," they become those touchstones in life during troubled times.

