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POWERED BY YOU AND THE

Volunteer to create a greener community

MAY 3, 2009

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Volunteering always makes me feel good whether it's working with the disabled children and adults at our annual VSA arts of Michigan festival or sitting on the board of the Schoolcraft College Friday Evening Music Recital Committee.

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Laurie Ramroth is no different when it comes to lending a helping hand. After returning to Livonia from Colorado last fall she began looking for opportunities. The 27-year-old likes the idea of giving back to the community. Every Wednesday and Thursday you can find her spending time in the Growing Healthy Kids and Earthworks Urban Garden programs at the Capuchin Soup Kitchen in Detroit. The children's project sprang from Earthworks which grows and harvests produce from four urban gardens.

"I started researching urban farms online and found the Earthworks Web site," said Ramroth, a graduate of Stevenson High School. "Because of growing up in Livonia I always felt like I was given a lot of opportunity that other kids don't necessarily have. I feel I'm making a positive contribution to Detroit, It's well organized and the people are pretty passionate about what they do."

Earlier in the season Ramroth cleaned out beehives. A few weeks ago she transferred seedlings like lettuce and broccoli to larger containers. Thursdays are reserved for the Growing Healthy Kids program designed for ages 5-11 who live within a two mile radius of the kitchen.

"We teach them about healthy eating and bring them closer to the land," said Ramroth. "We've been working on several projects involving the garden. We made trellises from old bike [tires](#) for peas to climb on, stepping stones for the garden out of cement and broken tiles, old bits of glass and marbles. We had an international food night and helped the kids make the food and sample it. It's been such a positive experience for me."

Ramroth is into greening the earth any way possible. She focused on alternative energy technology while earning a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering at Wayne State University. Since graduating in

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December 2006, she's worked with experimental fuel cells at Energy Conversion Devices in Rochester Hills and served an internship and fellowship at Rocky Mountain Institute in Colorado where she worked on the vehicle team to promote energy efficiency in cars and trucks. She's presently looking for a position in the clean tech field and would eventually like to help develop hybrid vehicles. She's also thinking about going back to school for a master's degree.

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"I first got interested in gardening because my mom did it all the time when I was growing up," said Ramroth. "In Colorado I got into community supported agriculture where you receive a box of vegetables and crops from local farmers and volunteered at a local farm. It's a way to strengthen the link between community and land whether helping kids or making use of the abandoned land, and just having different people together. It's a diverse climate and the different influences you can have on people that's what's been amazing for me."

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Detroit is very different when it comes to food availability. That's one of the reasons the Capuchins started the garden program now in its seventh season. It's difficult for people who come to the soup kitchen to find vegetables and fruits let alone afford the cost. Molly McCullagh learned firsthand about the program two years ago when she signed up for a year as a Cap Corps volunteer, which is similar to the Peace Corps and run by the Capuchins. At the end of the program she was hired as education coordinator for Earthworks where she facilitates Growing Healthy Kids and the Youth Farm Stand for teens. She has a bachelor degree in environmental studies from the University of Michigan.

"Detroit is known as a food desert. It's easy to get to a convenience store for junk food, but there are not many good food outlets in the city where they can have access to fresh produce," said McCullagh. "We train people to grow their own food. We have a [mobile](#) food market. We go to the Detroit produce terminal in southwest Detroit to pick up stuff and buy by the case load and then take it into the neighborhood every Thursday. On Earth Day we had a potluck for about 50 people to change our behaviors to reduce our impact on the environment. We ate grain salads."

McCullagh is always looking for volunteers to help with Earthworks programs and activities. For information, [call](#) (313) 579-2100, ext. 204.

"We have four garden sites in the neighborhood. One is a large site partnered with Gleaners (food bank),"

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said McCullagh. "We grow veggies and fruits, have a bee apiary, and compost scraps from the soup kitchen, Gleaners and businesses. We have a greenhouse production to grow transplants for people living in Detroit. We always take volunteers but also want to encourage people to get involved in their communities growing their own garden for themselves, hosting potlucks with neighbors, taking extra produce to local soup kitchens so produce is getting into people's hands. It's important not to just volunteer for an hour but to make a lasting impact by being involved with your own community and issues like hunger and poverty, to look for what we can do in our own lives and community."

Linda Ann Chomin is the health and community life reporter for the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers. She can be reached at Ichomin@hometownlife.com or (313) 222-2241.

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