

## **Our Kitchen Table Grows Gardens and Community during COVID-19**

Our Kitchen Table, founded in 2003, continues to mobilize low income families, even during the coronavirus pandemic. With the help of the City of Grand Rapids' Neighborhood Match Fund, OKT is helping the families to extend their food supplies by helping them to grow their own food. They also teach recipes and techniques for using what is grown.

Belinda Henderson, one of the food garden coaches, says they've been keeping the community gardening group going by adapting to use video calls. "And I have my own hazard suit. I was able to approach the house and with distance and a mask and we were able to talk and I was able to give them instructions," says Henderson.

Changing how they communicated with families during COVID-19 actually helped them to serve families better. "Video calls have gone wonderfully. Video has actually improved communication, because I can get the families on video when they're available, they don't have to go by my schedule. It's a lot easier for families. If a mom has four kids, trying to fit me in at 10 in the morning might be hard, but if she can call me in the evening once things are settled down, it's a lot easier for her. The families run the show and I give any help I can." Gardeners can take her out to their garden on a video call and ask questions about the bug on the tomato leaf or share views of their first strawberries.

Our Kitchen Table works with Blandford Nature Center who provides training for OKT's gardeners and seedlings at the beginning of each growing season. OKT then helps the families set up gardens in their backyard or in containers. "Most are container gardens because they're at apartments and it's amazing to see the things they're growing out of these boxes and buckets," says Henderson. "We also do 'Cook, Eat and Talks' sessions. We have them cook things a different way and use one ingredient they've never used. They love it."

The program pairs families with master gardeners and junior gardeners. They also have access to a farm consultant and food nutritionist. Families grow basil, garlic, cucumbers, tomatoes, and greens. Henderson emphasizes that the tastes of the families are honored, not everyone is made to eat the same thing. "Some have kale or lettuce or spinach. I like collards. I have one family growing zucchini because that's what they'll eat. We try to be exact so we don't do any food wasting. Another family only has cucumber." The main garden is at Martin Luther King Jr. Leadership Academy where they also grow peppers, greens, strawberries, garlic, mint.

"We make sure it's easy to maintain, especially this year during the virus. And the families love the program! I got one lady who thought she couldn't garden. She was afraid of worms and bugs. You should see her out there with her collard greens, looking at her soil, picking bugs off of things! And she's so proud of herself because she thought she couldn't be a gardener."

Henderson says this is her favorite part of working in the program. "A lot of them are first time growers and they are so exciting to work with! And they get frustrated, and then they see that

first little cherry tomato pop out and they are so excited to see it! ‘Hey, I did this!’ My biggest joy is watching them know they did it by themselves. And then they see what those same vegetables cost in the grocery stores versus the whole crop they grew.”

Henderson says the program is wonderful for her community and is excited to see where they go in the future. Our Kitchen Table adds a few more families every year. And they’ve been saving seeds. “This year I’m trying to see if the seeds we saved, if they’ll grow in our gardens and if they will grow on our land. My garden is a practice garden. I’m experimenting with my garden and it has amazing results.” If all goes well, they will be using their own seeds to grow seedlings with their community gardeners next year.

If you would like to support the work of Our Kitchen Table, [you can donate here.](#)