

Growing Hope for the Future



Amanda Edmonds,
founder of the Growing Hope organization

by Rachel Pastiva

Okay, I'll admit it. I've been a pessimist. I thought I was just a realist, my views reflecting the daily news updates on the rapidly declining state of the planet and inevitable end to humankind. It seemed to me that the apparent indifference of the General Public had already sealed a disastrous fate for us and that there was nothing anyone—including me—could do to change it. Of course, working at Crazy Wisdom as I do, I am well versed in the powers of the mind, and I quickly realized that I was in fact contributing to a disastrous fate through my own negative thoughts! In an attempt to shift my own consciousness about our future and in hopes of shifting others', I have begun to seek out community members and organizations whose positive outlook and determination are making our future bright. I was immediately drawn to Growing Hope through its name, and I learned rather quickly that its founder, Amanda Edmonds, knows exactly what growing hope is all about.

Growing Hope is a non-profit, volunteer-run organization based in Ypsilanti that teaches primarily the underserved and underprivileged how to design, build and sustain community gardens. Creating gardens builds community, improves nutrition and health, and creates food security in neighborhoods that may not otherwise have access to them. The organization, which will be celebrating its fifth anniversary this May, also runs the Downtown Ypsilanti Farmers Market and hosts a summer youth program. The youth program, Roots N' Shoots, focuses on building

gardening skills among grades eight through twelve and teaches them nutrition and health education. The success and interest in this young organization has grown so much that Growing Hope recently secured a location for the Growing Hope Center, a place where community members will be able to learn, gain support, and become inspired to improve their own lives and communities through gardening.

It's easy to see where the inspiration comes from when one becomes acquainted with Growing Hope's founder, Amanda Edmonds, and the work she's done that has led to Growing Hope. In 1999, while an undergraduate at the University of Michigan, Amanda organized her first garden, the Perry Learning Garden, at the Perry Development Center in Ypsilanti. Amanda built and maintained the garden on a volunteer basis, to educate children about gardening and nutrition. At the time, she was unaware of what the Perry Learning Garden would inspire. "I personally had visions of gardens all over the place, as I myself was understanding and getting more into the community garden, school garden movement across the country. But I didn't even have the idea that it would take off."

Amanda maintained the garden while at times holding down a full time job, attending graduate school, or teaching. As interest in the garden grew, she started an after school program and she began helping other gardens get

started with people she met within the community. Positive response to the gardens continued to increase and Amanda

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realized that it was necessary to become organized. "There was so much possible energy around what we were doing. I felt [that] to do the projects justice, from the first garden to all the now existing gardens...and our youth program and all the potential gardens, we needed the organizational structure of a non-profit." Growing Hope became a non-profit organization on May 23, 2003.

Gaining status as an organization, Growing Hope was able to articulate a mission that Amanda had only previously envisioned in her head. "Our vision is to help people improve their lives and communities through gardening. Our mission is to give everyone access to the resources and the inspiration, support, skills and knowledge to further whatever environmental, social, economic...missions they have using community gardening;

gardening where people come together as a tool for change and empowerment. It's really the vehicle, not the end."

With a background in environmental and social justice, Amanda's interests focus on how environmental issues affect race, class and gender. Her positive outlook is evident in the approach she and her organization have chosen to combat the inequities she finds there. "My feeling about community gardens is that they're a way to advocate

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for environmental justice in a really true, positive, proactive sense because the environmental justice movement, unfortunately, [sometimes] is very reactionary. I needed something personally, that could be more positive and proactive because that's more my style and what would fulfill me and keep me going."

Amanda's vision evolved as she discovered a relationship to public health that she had not initially considered. "I don't know that I would've guessed that we would've been so steeped in the public health movement. I was not really steeped in that world, and the original vision didn't include that as directly. In some ways I would say we are now a gardening and food security organization and we may even alter our mission to add 'and healthy food access' onto 'Growing Hope's mission is to help people improve their lives and communities through gardening.' Because our work has moved beyond just the gardening piece into the pieces that gardening really connects with."

Growing Hope is involved in the Ypsilanti Healthy Food Access Initiative, whose focus is bringing healthy food choices to areas of Ypsilanti that don't have access to them. This summer will also mark the third season of Growing Hope's Downtown Ypsilanti Farmers Market, which is conveniently located on the corner of Michigan Avenue and Hamilton and situated across the street from senior housing. The farmers market, which is open Tuesdays from 2pm-6pm May through October, gains financial support from Growing Hope, but it is run by a community advisory board. The farmers market promotes access to healthy food choices by accepting credit cards and food stamps, a function made possible by the Ypsilanti Food Co-op, a member of the market's community advisory board, as well as a vendor there.

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Having assisted in the development of over 25 gardens since it originated, Growing Hope has just purchased what Amanda refers to as "the ultimate, tangible representation" of the work that she and Growing Hope have done. In December of 2007, Growing Hope acquired a space, located on Michigan Avenue next to public housing, to build the Growing Hope Center. The center will be a place where community members can learn about gardening and how to plant and grow their dreams, something Amanda knows about. "I'm someone who's motivated in general by bringing dreams into reality... What I appreciate probably the most, is just the gratitude and the privilege to be able to do work that really feels like it's making a difference."

I find encouragement through Amanda Edmonds and Growing Hope. In a time when our future appears so uncertain, Amanda reminds us that the future is ours to create. Her commitment to a vision of one garden in an elementary schoolyard has inspired a movement. While she chose gardening as a way to grow hope in her community, Amanda teaches us that the key to growing hope is planting a dream where it has room to grow.

To learn more about Growing Hope or volunteer opportunities, please visit www.growinghope.net