

Mary's Farm:

A Commitment to Urban Social Justice

A faith-based Marianist farming operation in Dayton, Ohio, makes a brave statement about loving your neighbor.

BY JOHN GILMORE



Michael Schulz never thought he'd be a farmer. Yet this 28-year-old graduate of the University of Dayton, who has a degree in religious studies and human rights, found his career veering in that direction in the unlikeliest of places — Twin Towers, an inner-city neighborhood in Dayton, Ohio.

Located less than two miles from the University of Dayton's well-manicured campus, Twin Towers is a world of debilitating hardship, where more than 40 percent of the children live below the poverty level.

a basic human right, they began converting this land into vegetable gardens to grow produce for people in the neighborhood. What started as a seedling of an idea has grown into the Mission of Mary Cooperative (MMC), an urban farming enterprise.

The mission of the Lay Marianists is not simply to grow food. They are living in solidarity with the poor as a statement of social justice, nurturing their



Michael Schulz, founder, Mission of Mary Cooperative and the farm's executive director



Far left, Steven Mackell, co-farm manager, Mary Sheets, a neighborhood volunteer, and Becky Welch, a farm intern, maintain the gardens; Left, Richard Bogusz, a farm intern, waters plants in the Mission of Mary hothouse.

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Michael Schulz

“It's one of the poorest neighborhoods you can imagine,” says Marianist Brother Ray Fitz, Ph.D., Ferree Professor of Social Justice at the University of Dayton, who is well-known for championing the needs of the inner-city poor in Dayton.

Tim Odom, 39, a Twin Towers resident, knows the neighborhood well. “Houses are rundown and vacant. There is gun violence, drug activity and prostitution — and there are so many children. I wish the kids didn't have to be in the middle of all the garbage going on in the streets.”

Given a chance, most people would flee this part of East Dayton. Yet six years ago, Schulz and a group of Lay Marianists put down roots in a home one block from where Odom lives. They were committed to bringing the presence of Jesus to a place where God's grace is desperately needed. It wasn't long before they noticed an opportunity: Vacant lots pockmarked the neighborhood. Believing that access to healthy food is

neighbors through food and friendship. It is a mission based on faith, love and a conviction that the people of Twin Towers deserve a better life.

“We realized people in our neighborhood did not have access to affordable, fresh produce,” says Schulz, founder of the MMC and the farm's executive director. “Like Mary, we said ‘yes’ to starting the urban farm. Our hope is that the food we grow will help people live healthier lives. The gardens also create green spaces that begin to reimagine what a post-industrial city like Dayton could look like.”

Mary's urban homesteaders

The Lay Marianists first rented a house on Nassau Street in 2007. Last year, they purchased a house nearby on St. Paul Avenue. Today the Nassau-St. Paul Lay Marianist Community comprises six people. Schulz lives in the community with his wife, Beth, a music therapist. Eric Stoiber is a teacher at Chaminade Julienne



Steven Mackell and farm interns Richard Bogusz and Becky Welch sort and bag fresh produce from the gardens.

Catholic High School, a Marianist-sponsored school. David Weickert serves AmeriCorps at local high schools and works as farm manager. Bernie Weeks attends graduate school for pastoral ministry at the University of Dayton, and Danielle Joseph is studying integrated health counseling at the Institute for Integrative Nutrition.

Because many community members have day jobs or are students, the farm is run by a cadre of interns, volunteers and a few full-time staff. The work is physically challenging. Schulz's team doesn't use chemicals, but tends to the crops by hand, taking advantage of every daylight minute during the planting and harvesting seasons. When they are outside working, neighbors often stop by to chat.

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When Odom moved into the neighborhood in 2010, he didn't know anybody. "They knocked on my door and invited me to dinner, and they still do," he says. "We have awesome meals from their garden, study the Bible and just talk."

The MMC also is nurturing relationships among the interns and staff, inspiring them to go out and make a difference.

Volunteers from the University of Dayton — a Marianist university — and local high schools, including Chaminade Julienne, as well as churches

and youth groups regularly work on the farm for service projects. As they contribute their sweat equity, they learn about land stewardship and what it means to have an intentional urban presence.

"I got hooked on their spirit and sense of community," says Libby Freeze, a graduate of Ohio's Denison University who was an intern at the farm in 2011 and is now a farm manager at a nonprofit organization in Ypsilanti, Mich. "I grew up Catholic, but had become disillusioned with Catholicism. By acting on their beliefs, these community members helped me rethink my beliefs and opened me to their spirituality."

Faith-based farming

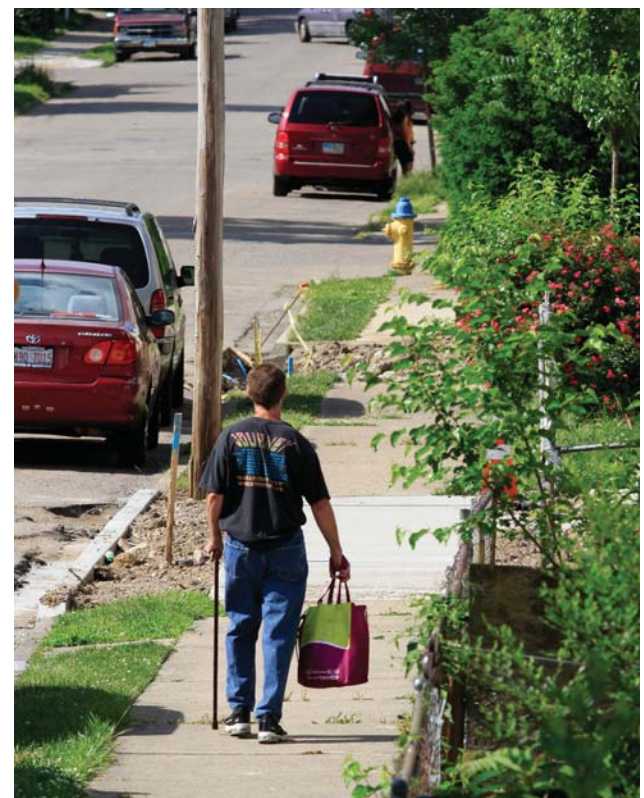
The lay community relies on a life of prayer and ongoing acts of kindness to provide their neighbors a taste of Marianist spirituality — and their palates a sampling of fresh vegetables. They have a daily prayer schedule and host a regular house Mass.

"This is not just an economic endeavor — it is a faith-based enterprise," says Brother Ray. "Their challenge will be to maintain their great energy while staying true to their Marianist ideals and what God is calling them to do in this neighborhood."

With the help of volunteers and interns, the farm is selling enough food to break even and pay for its operations. To become self-sufficient, the MMC is exploring ways to generate more revenue. They also

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Marianist Brother Ray Fitz



Each week, the Mission of Mary farm delivers bags of fresh produce to residents in the Twin Towers neighborhood.

would like to employ people from the neighborhood.

“If we are doing God’s will, then how do we keep it going — make it sustainable — so we can increase our impact?” asks Schulz. “That’s the question that gnaws at me.”

Brother Ray and Marianist Brother Tom Pieper, who met most of these young men and women at the University of Dayton, serve as the community’s mentors in matters both spiritual and practical. Brother Ray is helping them navigate the paperwork



required to establish the MMC as a nonprofit organization so it can accept tax-exempt donations and continue to grow.

One key to the success of the farm is finding creative ways to make the food affordable and easily accessible to their East Dayton neighbors.

In 2012, they established a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) program to sell discounted bags of produce each week to residents during the 20-week growing season.

Twice a week, they bring newly picked produce to the local food pantry at St. Mary Catholic Church, where they serve 100 to 150 people.

Every second Sunday, the community hosts a meal at Dayton’s New Hope Church, where many of their neighbors worship.

The Lay Marianists also operate a weekend roadside food stand on Xenia Avenue, a main thoroughfare where they farm a small plot.

Tangible results

This season, the community is growing more than 30 different vegetables, along with fruit and nut trees — “almost everything except corn and soybeans,” says Schulz.

The Lay Marianists are providing fresh, healthy food. New green spaces are brightening the neighborhood. There are smiles, waves and cookie deliveries from neighbors, some of whom have been inspired to beautify their own yards.

“Our hope is that people feel a renewed pride in the neighborhood and more optimism about the future,” says Schulz.



“We can’t achieve everything Chaminade, Adèle and Marie Thérèse had in mind by growing a few vegetables,” admits Stephen Mackell, acknowledging the inspiration they receive from the Marianist founders. A spring 2013 graduate of the University of Dayton, Mackell was an intern at the farm last summer and is now sharing the role of farm manager. He is hopeful about their impact. “The farm enables us to engage with people in the inner city. It’s an example for urban centers across the country of how one’s intentions and spirituality can transform a place,” he says.

The Lay Marianists are making a difference, one carrot, garden plot and kind gesture at a time.

“If more people came together and worked toward a solution like they are doing here, maybe it wouldn’t be so bad,” says Odom. “These folks are trying to make an impact, and that is what Dayton needs.” ■

John Gilmore is a freelance writer from St. Louis.

Every second Sunday, members of the Nassau-St. Paul Lay Marianist Community host a meal at Dayton’s New Hope Church, where many of their neighbors worship. Much of the meal is made from produce grown on the farm.