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Kudos to CSU for empowering pioneer

By THE DAILY SENTINEL

Sometimes collaborations make so much sense that it's hard to believe someone had to come up with the idea.

In the case of the Community Alliance for Education and Hunger Relief, it was Amanda McQuade who inspired the Colorado State University Western Colorado Research Center to consider how the fruits and vegetables it raises for research could make a big dent in the Grand Valley's hunger problem.

McQuade certainly knew it. She had been driving a minivan over backroads in Mesa County, picking up leftover produce from area farms, which she delivered to local food banks.

Over time, more and more of the food she was picking up was coming from the CSU station on Orchard Mesa. So last year officials at the station gave her the resources to launch the alliance, instantly establishing one of the most innovative hunger-relief organizations in the nation and creating a blueprint for how other research farms can help communities battle hunger across the state.

"This is a really nice way to connect with the community in a broad way while still maintaining our fundamental agricultural mission," said Western Colorado Research Center Manager Greg Litus.

In the past, the center sold surplus fruits and vegetables that weren't needed for research. Now, it donates that surplus — more than 190,000 pounds last year alone — to local food banks and School District 51.

Under McQuade's leadership, the alliance is more than just a distributor of harvest yields. CSU has provided a budget for McQuade to hire two interns from Western Colorado Community College's agricultural science program. They coach more than 200 volunteers, manage a greenhouse and supervise fields.

The alliance hosted 230 students from local schools to plant more than two acres of crops at the research center. When those vegetables are harvested later this month, they'll be served on the District 51 Lunch Lizard food truck and at the Food Bank of the Rockies. The alliance not only feeds the hungry, it teaches young people where food comes from, which is the foundation for nutritional awareness and healthy eating choices.

The research center is preparing to break ground a new building with a commercial kitchen, which will allow community groups to host events where people can learn about nutrition by harvesting and cooking fresh food.

The only thing that's limiting the alliance's reach is volunteers. McQuade needs more of them. Those interested in volunteering with the alliance or supporting the organization financially can call Amanda McQuade at 462-2113.

We're lucky to have a pioneer like McQuade channeling resources into a formidable campaign to eradicate hunger in Mesa County.