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CSU helps busy activist feed hungry

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By WYATT HURT



Amanda McQuade, left, community alliance for education and hunger relief, and Dilan Daigneault, intern with WCCC agricultural science program, pulls weeds around tomato plants at the Colorado State University Western Colorado Research in Orchard Mesa on Wednesday, June 13, 2018. The veggie plots were planted by elementary school children.

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Across the country, hundreds of agricultural research centers support local farmers through innovative research. But only one is pushing the limits of these centers' traditional roles by launching a large-scale initiative to help end hunger in its community.

Last year, the Colorado State University Western Colorado Research Center became home to the Community Alliance for Education and Hunger Relief, one of the most innovative hunger-relief organizations in the nation. Already, there are plans to grow the group's reach.

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.

Amanda McQuade, the alliance's founder, has deep roots in the hunger-relief movement. In 2009, she began driving her van through back roads and picking up leftover produce from farms. Once her van was full, she'd drop off the fresh fruits and vegetables to food banks.

"I had a child who liked to sleep in the car, and I had a minivan, so I said, 'Let's do it,'" McQuade said. "Over time, more and more of what I was collecting was coming from the CSU station."

Impressed with her efforts, CSU offered her a position at its research center on Orchard Mesa last year, providing her with resources to launch the alliance. Now, instead of filling a minivan with produce, she fills multiple semi-trucks at a time. Last year, the alliance donated 18 acres worth of 23 different high-quality fruits and vegetables to community organizations.

Two paid interns, Dilan Daigneault and Sarah Tate, students in Western Colorado Community College's agricultural science program, spend their days ensuring the alliance will enjoy a bountiful harvest. They coach volunteers, manage a greenhouse and supervise the fields, gaining hands-on experience in agriculture along the way.

"The work is rewarding and gives me a sense of pride when I drive through town," Daigneault said. "It makes me proud to be able to make an impact."

McQuade and her interns have help from more than 200 volunteers who harvest almost half the fruits and vegetables donated. As they work, volunteers discuss food insecurity and local agriculture, going home with a box of freshly picked produce.

Local students are also pitching in. This spring, 230 students from four schools planted 2 1/2 acres of crops. After being harvested this month, their produce will be served on the District 51 Lunch Lizard and at the Food Bank of the Rockies.

"We want to give kids really natural experiences in the garden, allowing them to learn about nutrition and appreciating food," McQuade said.

The alliance is part of CSU's efforts to expand their community outreach, according to Western Colorado Research Center Manager Greg Litus.

"This is a really nice way to connect with the community in a broad way while still maintaining our fundamental agricultural mission," he said. "With Amanda's program, it's clear that we have insights to offer hunger relief programs across the state."

McQuade hopes to help research centers across the country pursue initiatives similar to her own. She was a speaker at this month's Leadership Forum on Hunger, hosted by the Western Colorado Community Foundation, and presented the alliance's story at a national conference for food banks.

"Amanda is a pioneer and absolutely committed to teaching people about the prevalence of hunger in their communities. I don't know anyone else who is doing the work Amanda is," said Katie Ettman, food sourcing coordinator for the Food Bank of the Rockies.

Despite this national attention, McQuade hasn't lost sight of local needs. In the coming months, McQuade and her interns hope to expand the alliance's nutrition education and community outreach programs.

The research center is preparing to break ground on a new building with a commercial kitchen, which will allow community groups to host events where individuals can learn about nutrition by harvesting and cooking fresh food. They're also partnering with doctors to

provide educational programming on obese patients and senior citizens.

In order to expand, she needs more boots on the ground.

"We're limited by manpower. We have plenty of land. In fact, people are offering me land all the time. But if I get another acre, I need another intern," McQuade said.

Those interested in volunteering with the alliance or making a monetary contribution should call Amanda McQuade at 462-2113.