

# Connecting research to the community through produce donations

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**Amanda McQuade is the director of the Community Alliance for Education and Hunger Relief based at the Western Colorado Research Center in Grand Junction.**

*Courtesy photo*

Amanda McQuade founded Grow Another Row several years ago and began gathering produce donated to the backyard gleaning effort. McQuade was raising small children at the time and having accessible produce was something she wanted all parents in Mesa County and surrounding areas to have.

The Western Colorado Research Center at Colorado State University began donating harvested and culled produce to her from the pomology program. Most of the data researchers collect on the tree fruit must be gathered at about the same time as harvest, leaving a conflict between timely data gathering and optimal harvest timing. McQuade began volunteering at the research center and the majority of produce she was gathering to distribute to the food banks originated there. The opportunity to connect the research center to the community was recognized and in 2016, the idea of utilizing volunteers to harvest and using the experience and the produce to reach local students became what is now the Community Alliance for Education and Hunger Relief Program.

With McQuade as the coordinator, the program grows four acres of vegetables to donate, utilizes volunteers to pick study produce, and trains post-secondary students in small scale agriculture.

“We treat it like we would if we were selling it,” she said. “If there’s a flaw from hail we’ll give our partners a head up and give them the option of whether or not to take it. We abide by all Food Safety Modernization Act rules in terms of produce safety because we’re required but it’s also good training for the students and a good practice. Mainly the message is we want to convey respect to the people who are going to get it.”

McQuade stands firm that clients who receive the produce should be excited and proud to eat fresh and local food and serve it to their families. The integration of the delivery of the appealingly packed produce offers additional experience and training to students.

The Mesa County Workforce Center is another partner of the Alliance and gives people exploring new careers exposure to vegetable production as well as experience within the pomology and viticulture programs.

#### INVOLVING CHILDREN

School children — over 2,600 since 2017 — are also welcomed into the fields and orchards with the goal of increasing the amount of fruits and vegetables people eat. Food insecurity is addressed through donations to the food banks and education, leaning on McQuade's science education background, is delivered in hands-on activities and tastings.

"The intent is to get people more engaged with where their food comes from because we want them to eat it," she said.

Students spent about 2,100 hours of student engagement on the farm last year. In the new facility, the state of the art, 30-seat teaching kitchen, which McQuade said mimics a fancy home kitchen, allows food to be brought in from the field for additional engagement. The goal isn't to duplicate other services already done well by other organizations like Cooking Matters, but to support programs with similar goals to give students and community members the opportunity to try different foods with hands-on engagement.

Post-secondary students are leaving the program and finding their stride in agriculture graduate studies, STEM education, agriculture, health equity and food insecurity roles, and community-based nutrition.

McQuade said local agriculture producers seem supportive of the program and the ag literacy it brings to community schools. She remains adamant that programs ought not depend upon a grower's misfortune, perhaps a crop failure or labor shortage, for produce. Making farmers true partners, she said, comes from mutual benefit rather than betting on their difficulties.

In her eight years of Grow Another Row work, McQuade said she directed about 50,000 pounds of produce to food banks.

"That was hard earned," she said. "I was driving around town in my van with that food packed around my children. That was a hard-earned 50,000 pounds. In the three years we've been here, we've directed over 270,000 pounds so you realize where your best placed asset is."

The alliance also partners with other experiment stations to capitalize on what works best for them. Because food banks have a purchasing budget, if produce can be offered at the right price point, it can be utilized and experiment stations — whether a you-pick orchard, potato growers or melon growers in the southeastern part of the state — can be paid a price to meet operating costs and keep the produce grown on the research facility out of the open market.

"We have to be realistic about what we can do and how it fits into our mission, which is research," she said. "It can't interfere, but we also need to be responsive to our community." ❖

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