



Feeding body and soul

As a nutritionist in a Center for

Malnourished Children, my Peace Corps project featured a community garden with twin goals of providing more vegetables for the Center and motivational education on growing vegetables to people who relied mostly on rice and beans to feed their families. But in those years just after Hurricane David, electricity and water were luxuries in my small town, where every time the lights went out, which was often, people would remark in a fatalistic tone of voice, “*se fue la luz*”—the light has gone—as if electricity had taken a holiday. We hoped the water we had stockpiled would be enough to meet our needs until we heard our neighbors chant “*vino la luz*”—the light has returned—and the municipal pump worked again.

The community garden was a tough sell in the desert, where it was difficult to grow much of anything that didn’t get eaten by the goats that wandered around town, regarding a fence as an interesting obstacle between them and dinner. The

day I weeded a tarantula hiding among the radishes was the day I gave up on the garden. No one but me wanted to eat them anyway.

A much more ambitious and well-planned project to generate local produce while teaching people how to grow food for themselves is emerging in Reno, undertaken by a new non-profit organization, Soulful Seeds.

The project is headed by a remarkable leader, Earstin Whitten, who grew up in Arkansas picking cotton in a sharecropper family with 14 siblings, their meagre wages supplemented by their family garden. Reno is lucky he retired here after 30 years in the insurance industry.

Whitten always had a passion for teaching people how to grow food for their families. A spinning instructor at St. Mary’s Fitness Center, he heard about a small piece of land the hospital owned nearby dedicated to a community garden which lacked volunteers. His wife and co-founder of Soulful Seeds, Dee Schafer-Whitten, agreed

to spend a year between jobs to file the paperwork to become a non-profit agency and get the organization started.

Soulful Seeds partners with many local groups to deliver healthy food to hungry people through a “Share the Harvest” program. A focus on neighborhood gardens helps residents develop their own plots and grow food close to the people who need it, while teaching them to sustainably grow, harvest, and cook healthy food, in partnership with the Great Basin Food Co-op, whose members teach classes in cooking one-pot meals. Workforce development activities are planned to provide job opportunities through culinary based nonprofit businesses, such as a farmers market stand and a spice company.

Soulful Seeds is developing projects to incorporate low-income and homeless volunteers with Northern Nevada HOPES and Washoe County Human Services Agency. They’re negotiating for two to three acres on the Northern Nevada Adult Mental Health Services campus to cultivate row

crops, build green houses and raised planters and make their own compost.

This grassroots effort led by passionate residents needs donations of time and resources. They’ll even supply the seeds and training if you want to contribute food from your own home garden.

Schafer-Whitten was emotional when asked what motivated her to work for free for a year to launch Soulful Seeds. She said it’s worth it “when I go to parks and deliver fresh food to the homeless population and they are so grateful, when I look at the affordable housing issues in this community—people who are pushed out of their homes—who still need to eat.”

These inspirational Nevadans prove you don’t have to travel around the world to contribute your time and talent; those opportunities are right in your own backyard. □

For more information go to www.Soulful-Seeds.com

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