



## Teens Transforming Vacant Land to Urban Farm

By Ariane Bicho and  
Mohammed Nuru

"I remember a unique garden where we grew tires, cars, refrigerators," says Mary Burns, Director of the Recreation and Park Department. "This is a much better use of space." The "better" that Burns refers to is SLUG's newest project, St. Mary's Urban Youth Farm, where on July 7, Burns, Mayor Jordan, and other distinguished speakers exchanged stories and broke ground on what will be San Francisco's first, one-of-a-kind urban youth farm.

Only three months ago, the four-acre site (owned by Recreation and Park), was as Burns describes it: an illegal dumping ground. The once thriving creek where Mayor Jordan played as a boy was near extinction; non-native plants were strangling native cattails, meadow barley, and other flora, driving out and diminishing native fauna



At ease: Youth Garden Interns take a break from ecological restoration work at St. Mary's Urban Youth Farm.

such as butterflies and garter snakes.

Turning the tide on this destruction is a group of 50 teens from SLUG's Youth Garden Internship program. This summer, with funding from many City agencies including NEP, MOCYF, MOCD, and Recreation and Park, these teens — mostly residents of San Francisco's public housing communities

— earn competitive wages working 20 hours a week restoring the urban farm to its ecological roots. The site will combine a crop area, greenhouse, edible landscaping, a materials resource center and alternative energy sources integrating it with restored wetland, creek and drought tolerant areas.

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### SLUG UPDATE

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## Learn About Lead, for Your Kid's Sake!

**A**re you aware of possible lead hazards in your soil? Lead-based paints can contaminate soil as a result of chipping, weathering or sandblasting, and soil near well-traveled roadways with high exposure to automobile emissions also is suspect. While lead, in small amounts, is in the air, water, soil and food we eat, reducing your exposure can prevent lead poisoning and help prevent permanent injury, such as brain damage, to your growing children.

SLUG is developing a lead information center and soil testing kit, in collaboration with the Mayor's Office of Housing and the Department of Public Health. If you garden or if children play in your yard, we recommend you test your soil for lead. SLUG now offers soil testing services to its members and the general public for a very small fee. The process takes two to three weeks. For more information, please call Paul or Becca at the SLUG office: 285-7585. ♻️

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### Helping Hands

A community collaboration between SLUG, city agencies, the Neighborhood Green Corps, the Alemany Resident Management Council, the California Native Plant Society and caring corporations, the farm is unique because it has urban roots and because low-income and at-risk youth are building, operating and maintaining the project for the benefit and beautification of all San Franciscans. "The organizations that have funded the farm realize it's an investment in our own security and the health and stability of our city," says Mohammed Nuru, SLUG's Executive Director. And Burns adds that the project "epitomizes what government should be doing to help their people."

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"The teens in the program plant a seed, they plant a plant, and they see it grow. It's about teaching pride and responsibility. If you care for the plants, they thrive," says Joshua Bloom, SLUG's Director of Youth and Economic Development.

The youth farm provides low-income teens not only with employment, business management training, landscaping, sustainable horticulture, and non-violent conflict resolution, but the farm is a refuge



**Proclamation: Mayor Frank Jordan declares July 7 as SLUG Day in San Francisco.**

from daily exposure to violence and a healthy alternative to crime, drugs and gangs. "For these teens, the farm can be the difference between street-life and a livable future in our city," says Nuru.

Speaking at groundbreaking ceremonies, Youth Intern Bhanica Adams says, "We're not selling drugs like we used to, we're not dead like we're supposed to be and we're not in jail like we should be." Adams also



**From the heart of Alemany: Teen interns strike a pose with Mayor Frank Jordan at St. Mary's Urban Youth Farm's ground-breaking ceremonies.**

says that the teens, who live in different communities, learned to let go of turf issues and are now working together while at the farm.

Community activist Sylvia Simmons, instrumental in recruiting many of the youth to join the program, encouraged the interns to "continue to blossom into working. Success does not just come in money," she says. "Obedience, discipline, respect — that's what I see you guys are learning — keep pushing on that way, you are successful."

### Youth Need More Green Spaces

When 40 percent of a schoolchild's waking hours are discretionary, according to a Carnegie Corporation study, and when teens are frequently left alone with nothing to do and no adult supervision, it makes sense to provide teens with positive outlets. What kinds of alternatives are youth asking for? Carnegie researchers asked adolescents what they most wanted during non-school hours; safe parks and recreation centers topped the list.

Teens living in low-income neighborhoods rely more on public parks and recreation centers for entertainment and educational opportunities than teens from areas where parents can afford camps, lessons and other activities. "The greatest shortage of green spaces and recreation facilities are in the communities where there is the greatest need," says Nuru. "As a community, we can change that."

A slice of rural life in San Francisco, the Urban Youth Farm belongs to a larger recreation area called St. Mary's Park, which is bordered by several ethnically and economically diverse communities including Alemany, Bernal Heights and the Excelsior. The lower portion of St. Mary's Park contains the Urban Farm, while the upper portion is home to a baseball diamond, tennis and basketball courts, a gymnasium, children's playground and a picnic area. The park is also bordered by the 280

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freeway, which has a walkover from the Excelsior District, making the farm easily accessible for people from adjoining neighborhoods and those living across town or in the Bay Area.

Considering that on busy weekends Golden Gate Park is bumper to bumper with cars, pedestrians, equestrians, cyclists and skaters, it makes sense to provide more green

**When teens finish developing the farm, it will serve as an educational hub teaching the community about the benefits of organic horticulture...**

spaces in the Foggy City. San Francisco's Trust for Public Land reports that the greatest need for parks and green spaces is in metropolitan areas, where 80 percent of Americans will be living by the turn of the century. Clearly, the development of SLUG's Urban

Farm will provide an alternative recreation site for San Francisco, particularly for people living nearby. In fact, it already has.

In preparation for the ecological restoration work of SLUG's summer youth interns, residents of the Alemany and Bernal Heights communities, SLUG staff and board members, and volunteers from Neighborhood Green Corps joined forces on May 7 and cleaned up lower St. Mary's Park, filling a 16 foot dumpster with debris. And on June 3, another volunteer effort called Habitat Restoration Day brought out community members and other volunteers to help teens clear non-native vegetation.

"What better way to get people involved than to start with the dirt itself," says Anthony Lincoln, Director, Mayor's Office of Children, Youth and Families, on July 7 ground-breaking ceremonies.

### Progress at the Farm

So far, teens completed the farm's preliminary greenhouse, which provides a location for starting seeds, extending the growing season, increasing productivity and reducing seed costs. A new and sophisticated 1,000 square foot greenhouse is being built on the site thanks to funding from the Mayor's Office of Community Development. And appropriate trees for the urban mini-orchard were selected based on climate, production, disease resistance and future marketability. Eventually, teens will harvest and distribute to the community apples, pears, avocados, persimmons, peaches, plums, figs and walnuts.

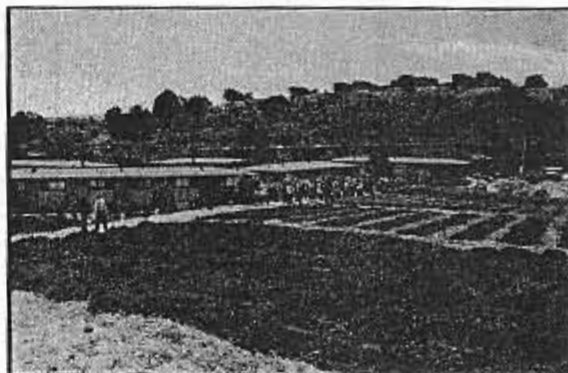
The community garden is built and in use by 31 households of the Alemany Housing Development. Market garden opportunities, which emphasize future jobs and revenue sources for the teens, are in the experimental stage. "Teens have shown great initiative with a rosemary and garlic vinegar product called Urban Herbals," says Becca Praeger, SLUG's Youth and Economic Development Assistant. "The 150 prototypes sold-out at community events and now we have retailers interested in the product."

Like SLUG's award-winning Garden for the Environment, the Bay Area's only hands-on demonstration garden, when teens finish developing the farm, it will serve as an educational hub teaching the community about the benefits of organic horticulture and use of solar panels and windmills. Interpretive walkways will join together sections of the farm allowing visitors to leisurely learn about native and drought tolerant plants, flowers and irrigation methods. And community groups and gardeners from all across the City can take advantage of a materials resource center offering compost, mulch, cocoa

hulls, wood chips, recycled lumber, rocks and gravel.

### Gardening creates synergy

"The process of building the farm has really changed many of the teens," says Nuru. "They're learning how good it feels to accomplish things, and this



A slice of rural life: Urban farms like SLUG's (above) can thrive in cities.

rubbs off in their lives with better grades, personal discipline and pride."

"Asphalt is very boring," says SLUG Board Member Nan McGuire. "These teens live in communities mostly covered in concrete and the fact that they can connect with the land and gain satisfaction from a project that has a beginning, middle and ends with a harvest is something even many adults no longer experience."

As a result of the transformation of lower St. Mary's Garden into a thriving urban farm, the entire community is undergoing a facelift. "If you can get people organized around a community greening project," says Nuru, "chances are you can get people who have lived in neighboring communities for 20 years to come together and actively talk to each other and organize for other community improvements or just something as simple as putting together a weekend softball game."

Looking back in 20 years from today, Nuru hopes, "the farm and surrounding park will provide a lot of activities for the youth. The transition from youth to adulthood is murky; kids need ways to learn about leading honest lives." 🌱