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Flint-area karate school makes urban farming push

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GENESEE TOWNSHIP, Mich.



Teenagers in matching green T-shirts line up holding rakes and shovels, and take a karate stance.

They've spent the day tending to neat rows of vegetables and feeding dozens of chickens. Others dug trenches for an irrigation system or hammered together a pen for goats, on a lot just outside the blighted city of Flint that only three years ago was a dumping ground.

Getting young people involved in converting vacant urban spaces to grow food is a key part of neighborhood redevelopment efforts across the country. At the farm in Genesee Township, Jacky and Dora King have taken it a step further -- pairing farming and karate to teach similar lessons.

"Discipline, respect and not taking people for granted," said Kyle Tyler, an 18-year-old from Flint Township who has trained at King Karate for three years. "It's a good mixture, because it teaches you things from both sides."

The Kings bought the land for Harvesting Earth Educational Farm in 2006. This summer, their work force ballooned to about 45 young people, and they're clearing other lots, acquiring vacant homes and laying plans for an orchard on a nearby 30-acre plot.

"It's just a piece of our self defense," said Dora King, 49, a sixth-degree black belt. "If I'm lucky enough, I might be able to go through my whole life not having to kick or punch in a self-defense situation. But I always have to eat."

The Kings live and work on the edge of Flint, where families have suffered as the number of people who work for General Motors has dwindled from more than 89,000 to about 6,000. Their school and home are in neighboring Mount Morris Township, across a street from the farm.

For the Kings, farming in the neighborhood is part of the solution -- bringing both employment and an economic opportunity.

"I'm not in this for gardening," said Jacky King, 56, an eighth-degree black belt. "I'm in this for jobs for the kids."

Workers are paid through partnerships with several community organizations, including the Ruth Mott Foundation and Baker College. The Kings offer free karate instruction to their workers, and about 50 karate students put in volunteer time.

"They start seeing how it's possible to turn ugly into beautiful," Dora King said.

Sixteen-year-old Shaquita Morris said incorporating karate training with her summer job helps her fellow teens work better together.

"Flint needs a lot of help," Morris said. "I feel that I should be here to help out."

Many of the properties that the Kings are working to redevelop came from the Genesee County Land Bank, a public authority formed to stabilize Flint-area neighborhoods by acquiring abandoned properties through tax foreclosure. The land bank owns about 5,600 properties in the Flint area and has been working to get some of that land into the hands of people who want to grow food.

Flint also is considering zoning changes to make it easier for urban gardeners to grow and sell what they harvest. The land bank's executive director, Douglas Weiland, said the cleanup efforts and the active farming work have prompted other area homeowners to make improvements.

Jacky King knows most of the neighbors by name -- or by nicknames -- and keeps an eye on those who maintain their property or leave it to fall into disrepair.

"I think the world of him," said 76-year-old Junior Little, who lives across the street from the Kings' Genesee Township farm. He remembers when a home was on the site, but it was torn down years ago and he has watched the lot's transformation from a dumping ground.

As Little spoke, workers used hatchets to chop away at tree roots and a tractor to pull out stumps along one side of the farm. A commercial building next door is being renovated for use as a cooking school, while down the street the Kings have plans to turn a former restaurant into the "Sidekick Cafe."

"We have hope that it's not going to always be rough," Dora King said.

On the Net:

King Karate: <http://www.kingkarate.org>

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