



green fingers help reshape troubled neighborhoods

BUSY FINGERS indicate something is being done. Sometimes the fingers stray from acceptable paths to engage in less than honorable activity, but when the active fingers are guided along productive lines they generally create something for which a community and even an entire city can be proud. This was the case in Portland, Oreg., where an idea became a reality in 1968 and grew throughout the State and Nation to help troubled neighborhoods solve their own problems with pride.

Portland differs little from any city in the United States except that its size offers more problems than a wayside town, but it has fewer problems than the largest cities in the Nation. There

are the days with smog, bulging schools, a river splitting the city and too few bridges to handle the traffic during rush hours. Its people can resemble any city cross section, anywhere, and some of them find themselves with problems they can't handle until shown a way.

An area of Portland known as Albina was a depressed and almost forgotten tract of land on the east side of the Willamette River. The residents were predominantly Black and could speak about little else but joblessness, crime among adults and juveniles, inadequate nutrition, broken homes, needy dependents, and the indifference of absentee landlords to substandard housing conditions.

Something had to be done that money could not provide alone. A new attitude and spirit was needed, but a simple, worthwhile project to bring it about had not been found. Travel away from Albina was difficult and few could participate in activities that were not within walking distance of their homes. Youngsters had been able to participate to a limited extent in scouting, church outings and 4-H Club programs, but again the problem of going away from the community prevented participation by more than a mere handful.

Three things happened early that spring that were to give Albina a new spark of hope. An imaginative member of the Oregon Federation of Garden Clubs (Mrs. Frances Mathews) had gotten the idea for her organization to sponsor a vegetable gardening project. She had discussed this with her friend, Mrs. Viviane Barnett, a Black real-estate broker who lived and conducted her business in Albina. Mrs. Barnett combined her enthusiasm with personal energy and drive to start the project moving.

The final event was the U.S. Government funding of special work to involve depressed areas in programs that were similar to or a direct part of 4-H Club work.

Mrs. Barnett found herself engaged in many meetings and campaigns to get information to the children and parents of the Albina area. Handbills, press releases, radio and television announcements all contributed to the gathering of interested but cautious persons who believed that the empty lots and backyards were meant for something better than growing weeds to hide the collection of refuse, rusting junk, and abandoned automobiles. Once cleared of debris, the fertile soil could be tilled and planted to vegetables and even

flowers to brighten the neighborhood, as well as offer the participating families a better variety of fresh produce for daily meals.

Committee action followed under the tireless Negro leader who knew the end of the day only by the time all work at hand was done. The project name, "Green Fingers," was born and was to identify all future efforts directed towards making the project a success.

Idle land under control of the State Highway Commission was given to the project free of charge for a 2-year period. This consisted of several city blocks or portions of blocks to be used for new highway construction some time after the 2-year period had passed.

Once the obstacles to use of the land had been cleared, the cleanup operations never wanted for volunteer help, trucks and other equipment to carry out the ground breaking and soil tilling operations. National Guard equipment use was donated to getting the garden tracts cleared, graded, and broken so tilling operations could be done on schedule. By this time 50 families had involved 200 persons in the hand tool work of final soil preparation.

Seeds, fertilizer, pesticides, and small equipment were needed to start the action on the newly-tilled gardens. Two other persons with several years' experience each in guiding of youth work through 4-H Club programs, Gray Thompson and Willard Lighty, gave help to locate seed from firms that had excess supplies. The firms made outright donations when they learned of the project goals.

Fertilizer manufacturers, pesticide formulators, and civic clubs turned their attention to the vegetable gardens of Albina. Equipment was loaned or donated for the safe and effective application of fertilizer, insect killers, and irrigation water.

The agri-business organizations had only to learn of a need and they provided the answer—because "Green Fingers" was no longer a strange word in Portland.

Seeds were packaged from the bulk supplies and a variety assortment given

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each participant along with the appropriate Oregon State University vegetable garden bulletins. Many had never before planted a seed or watched a small plant grow from the series of operations they were about to perform. More joined the program as churches and schools learned of the project and urged family participation.

Some of the more militant groups of black people endorsed the operation and gave active support in many ways because of the visible progress that was being made.

Water for summer irrigation is not always plentiful in "rainy" Oregon where clouds can suddenly disappear one day early in June to stay hidden until late fall. When water is available, it must be metered to and paid for by the user without exception.

A civic organization noted for its hilarity in getting worthwhile jobs done is the Portland Rainmakers who had launched a sales campaign to sell "Watered" and "Uncommon" stock at every opportunity, including an occasion when a member visited the floor of the United States Senate. Proceeds of the stock sales went to pay for the irrigation water used to keep gardens moving along.

Fear of vandalism was short-lived due to the number of persons involved in making the project a success. Some damage was done to the gardens by carelessness but the spirit and attitude of persons in the community provided both volunteer watches and a feeling of respect for the gardens which by this time had given a new life and hope to the community.

Everyone who could lend a helping hand was already working or asked if he could be involved.

One individual became the "water-master" in order to insure against any garden dying from lack of water when it was time to start the sprinklers. Waste of water too was a concern and this role of watermaster proved important since the individual was able to exert his friendly push towards some youngster who was not quite working up to capacity.

Success in one location proved to generate a competitive spirit and teamwork approach. Comparisons of one group's success to another group's efforts identified the need for saying thank you to all the participants and project supporters. Mrs. Barnett already had the plans made for a harvest festival where vegetables were exhibited and judged.

The event again was a huge success, and concluded with a soul-dinner picnic where the leaders and participants expressed gratitude for the help they had received.

Onlookers saw many ways to adapt this project to their own communities to provide a productive learning experience in their backyards and vacant lots.

The project had proven itself to be without an age limit as all from tiny toddlers to retired grandfathers took some kind of active part.

Young couples saw it as a way to stretch inadequate food budgets and provide themselves with a more nutritious diet.

Produce was used fresh, or stored and preserved by freezing and canning to provide vegetables for the gardenless winter months.

Albina no longer claims title to being the only or the largest home garden center in Portland. Its original 3 acres of vegetables have grown in size to the point where the leaders are not sure how large the aggregate of all plantings might be.

Other school units and churches have followed in the same path to utilize idle tracts of land which would otherwise collect junk partially hidden by weeds.

Today the count has risen into the thousands of persons throughout the country who find new adventure and learn new lessons as they help themselves. The numbers of idle and mischievous fingers are reduced as the younger generation beams with pride while showing visitors its accomplishments. The many leaders like Mrs. Barnett wear smiles of satisfaction in knowing their efforts have helped a group of "Green Fingers" build a better America.