The Riverfront Times

AUGUST 25 – 31, 1993 • NUMBER 777



photo by Mike DeFilippo

SEEDS OF CHANGE

Growing gardens offer signs of urban renewal in a fallow East St. Louis

DSW 135095

STLCOPCB4035054

BY GRETCHEN LEE

When Sister Cecilia Hellmann was first assigned to a parish in East St. Louis, she and the children who lived near the school where she taught would make daily forays into the neighborhood to pick up trash.

But instead of filling their litter bags with old candy wrappers and soda cans, the children and Sister Hellmann collected handfuls of spent shotgun shells and bullet casings in their daily litter brigades.

Hellmann vowed to create her first community garden after a disheartening day teaching at St. Patrick's School in East St. Louis. The topic that day was the U.S. Constitution.

As she lectured, she looked out the window at a vacant lot across the street. Like many of the vacant lots around town, it was piled high with garbage. She realized that many of her students had passed by that lot on their way to school.

Could Hellman reasonably expect them to believe in life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness when they lived day to day in a city that failed so miserably at living up to the basic American doctrine?

Hellman bought two lots for $100 each. With students and neighborhood kids, she planted perennial flowerbeds. And so the garden became a respite from the chaos that was growing up elsewhere around St. Patrick's. "Your roots are in the soil," says Hellman. "It's so true. There's a sense of healing in the earth. It's where life comes from."

Like that first effort, the handful of community gardens that have since sprung up in the embattled neighborhoods of East St. Louis are small victories, of sorts, amid the steady erosion of community. Poverty, crime and disenfranchisement have set neighbors apart from one another. But here, they come together.

"We have to somehow re-create our neighborhoods," says Hellmann, a community organizer with Operation New Spirit in East St. Louis. "The urban-garden project is such a healthy way for neighbors to talk to each other. Down the road, it could provide an economic advantage." Hellmann envisions a fresh produce stand where gardeners may sell their crops, and cooperatively run Christmas-tree farms to replace the trash-strewn vacant lots.

They're usually up and working in the garden by 5:30 a.m. But for a visitor, they'll wait until the late hour of 7 a.m. to plant the last of the summer vegetables. Seretha Coulter and Mozell Biggs make their way carefully through the muddy furrows to the spot slated for squash.

Biggs' son-in-law, Jerry Kenton, builds mounds of dirt with a hoe. Coulter uses a stick to poke holes in the center of the mound, drops three or four seeds in each, and then presses the soil on top.

Until this year, only weeds and scrub trees grew in the long, narrow plot that now houses the Cleveland Avenue garden. Coulter, Biggs and a third neighbor, Maryanne Morgan, have planted crowder peas, beans, peppers, Swiss chard, okra, peanuts, watermelons, cantaloupe, sweet potatoes and other vegetables.

Sitting on her front porch, Coulter often pauses in mid-sentence to wave at passersby who honk their horns. She has lived on Cleveland Avenue for 30 years. Biggs, sitting beside her, has lived across the street for 36 years. Morgan, who is considerably younger, lives around the corner and grew up in nearby Centerville, Ill.

They've seen a lot of changes in their neighborhood. The population has dropped by 40 percent over the last 30 years. The tax base has deteriorated as businesses moved out. And the crime rate has skyrocketed: From 1987 to 1991, the homicide rate doubled.

The women who tend the Cleveland Avenue community garden aren't the only ones who have invested sweat equity in the town they call home. The kids from

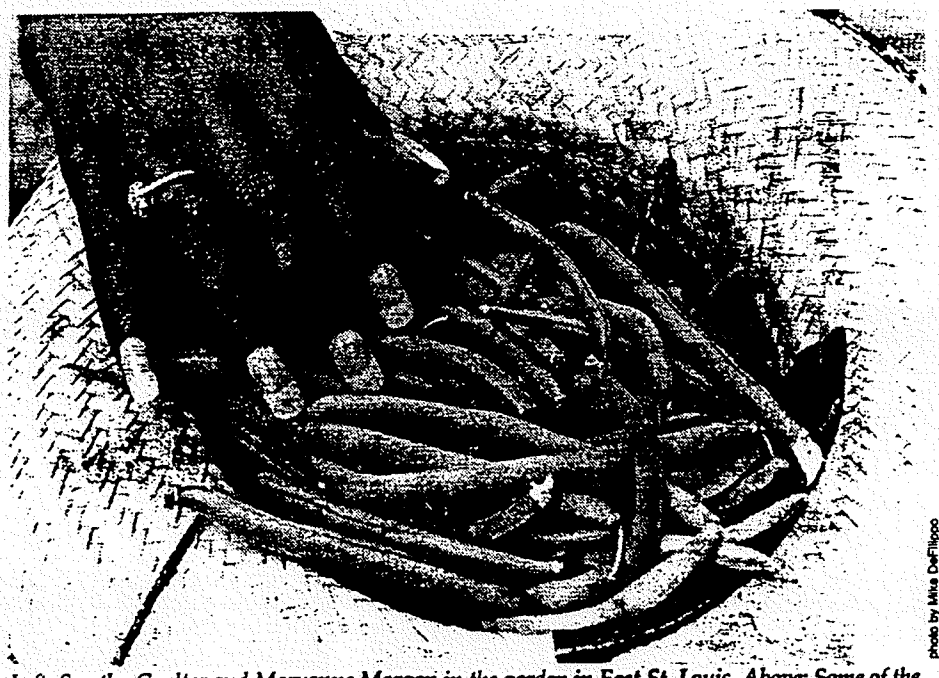

photo by Mike DeFilippo

Left: Seretha Coulter and Maryanne Morgan in the garden in East St. Louis. Above: Some of the harvest.

DSM 135096

STLCOPCB4035055

Willie Beard's 4-H club have also planted a community garden, as have elderly gardeners near the senior citizens' center. A demonstration garden is thriving near the State Community College, too.

"Next year, if the good Lord blesses us to be here and be able to work, we'll be out again," says Coulter, picking up her granddaughter's jump rope from the front walk.

Coulter and her co-gardeners are doing it all without city help. They don't have much money of their own, of course — 40 percent of families in East St. Louis live below the poverty level — and the city government could hardly be expected to chip in. This is, after all, a town that suffered the indignity of having a City Hall typewriter repossessed for non-payment this spring.

Federal money has paid for community gardening elsewhere in the United States. Chicago, for example, gets about $283,000 a year for its community-gardening efforts, says Dr. Susan Kohler, a research-project specialist from Southern Illinois University's Office of Economic and Regional Development. Kohler's office helped develop the urban-garden project in East St. Louis.

"Originally, the (U.S. Department of Agriculture) program funded one city per state," she says. "Chicago got the money for Illinois. We've been trying to get East St. Louis added, but so far, we haven't been successful."

Illinois Sens. Carol Moseley-Braun and Paul Simon have lobbied Dale Bumpers, the chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development and Related Agencies, for $250,000 from the Agriculture Extension Service's Urban Gardening program. No good news, so far.

"Right now, we're in the pilot stage," Kohler says. Until the program takes hold, would-be community gardeners in East St. Louis get by on donated equipment, materials, labor and funds.

At planting time, the group used seeds donated by Burpee Seed Company. Inmates from the Illinois Department of Corrections' horticulture program sent tomato and pepper seedlings. First-time offenders from the St. Clair County sheriff's department helped out three times a week in the spring to cut the grass, haul tires away and till the soil for the new gardens.

By early summer, the group had amassed $16,000 in grant money. Half of that came from Monsanto, which has a plant in Sauget, Ill., near East St. Louis. The remainder came from the College of Agriculture at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

As the summer wore on, more donations of equipment and materials came in. In mid-July, Coulter and Hellmann drove to the St. Louis suburbs to pick up a $5,000 check from an employees' group at Monsanto for equipment earmarked for the urban-garden project.

When the subject of community gardening was first broached in September 1992 at a seminar where 130 block leaders had gathered, 80 or 90 people raised their hands.

In December of that year, those willing were invited to a planning session for the gardens. Surprisingly, about 50 attended. "We could have had 15 or 20 gardens at that stage, if we'd had the funding," says Hellmann. Workers were ready to go.

Sadly, economics dictated that only four or five gardens could be started the first year. By midsummer, four had been planted. More sites may be added in the fall, with cool-weather crops like greens, peas and radishes planted there.

This spring, the group had hoped to plant a second children's garden on a vacant lot just off St. Clair Avenue. The site is dominated by a billboard that invites passersby to "Dream a Little Dream," and play Lotto.

But after the land was cleared and the debris carted away, another hurdle remained. Volunteers who came to turn the soil under had discovered broken glass in the dirt — a lot of it. For years, it turned out, the lot had served as an illegal repository for beer, wine, liquor and soda bottles. Even after plowing, hundreds of shards of broken glass remained, some embedded deeply in the soil.

Picking out each piece by hand would take more time than the group can give. Putting in raised beds might work, but that's too costly for this year's budget. So the lot on St. Clair Avenue will remain vacant for another year, at least.

It's a tough row to hoe, but block by block, at least some of East St. Louis is growing — from the grassroots. ■

DSW 135097

STLCOPCB4035056