

2014 Summer Youth Program



VINES' fifth Summer Youth Employment Program ended August 8th. That means that for five years now, we've allowed local youth to earn money while learning about agriculture, community building, and themselves in the process. We had a record number of applicants—somewhere in the thirties—and it was a challenge to select from our interviewees since so many exhibited potential and enthusiasm. But in the end a team of twelve bright, talented individuals was created: a group of youth with diverse ethnic and social backgrounds, educational aims, and ages, all working together for the common goal of making Binghamton a better place to live. Here is the story of what our employees accomplished this summer.

One of the best things about this run of the Summer Youth Employment Program was the mix of various skill levels and experience with food systems: about half of our employees were previous participants, whereas the other half ranged from agricultural enthusiasts to those who frankly didn't really care much for vegetables. Getting to know your coworkers can often be a difficult thing, especially when you're meeting them for the first time—so our answer was to make the process fun! We used a variety of teambuilding exercises including name memory games and our first ever weeding relay. It quickly became clear that this group possessed great synergy, and we knew we were in for good times.

Work on the farm included harvesting, planting, and general maintenance of the raised beds and composting systems. Our youth engaged in work ranging from picking some of the season's first squash and corn to breaking up sod so tough that many people would have thrown their hands up and walked away. One of the main goals of the

Summer Youth Employment Program is to instill a sense of responsibility and resilience in all of our participants, and it's clear that this year's team took this idea to heart. They managed to overcome cultural boundaries and push themselves as hard as necessary to achieve the goals asked of them, never complaining about tasks or trying to find ways out of doing them.



Although work on the farm and associated sites is the biggest part of the Summer Youth Program, the program's aim is to be much more than just a source of summer employment—we want our employees to be both educated and empowered as future leaders and role models . Taking this idea to heart meant giving our employees hands-on opportunities in subjects that impact their own lives. The youth engaged in cooking and nutrition education with Cornell Cooperative Extension Educator Ann Supa as they proactively took on the problem of too much salt, sugar and fat in their diets through tasty and healthy dietary options. To prepare them for future opportunities, we hosted a job readiness workshop intended to strengthen resumes (or start making them!), provide interview tips and techniques, and ultimately help our employees land the right job! We even taught our employees how to make easy and convenient container gardens from materials as common as soda bottles, reusable shopping bags, or virtually any other container with a few holes for drainage.



Because VINES works to combat food insecurity in the City of Binghamton, we wanted to give our employees a thorough understanding of our current food system, including how food is produced, transported, and ultimately made available to people. A trip to Binghamton University to meet with Rich Herb, head chef of the University's busiest dining hall, allowed the youth to see some of the details of large-scale food services firsthand. We visited Hemlock Creek CSA to get down to the root of a much larger agricultural venture than the half acre of land on the Urban Farm, giving an opportunity to see the bigger picture of farming. Perhaps most impressively of all, our youth helped us cook and serve food for well over 100 people for the community meal hosted at United Presbyterian Church. The experience was as new for them as it was for the VINES staff, as it was Lauren Tonti's first time managing the meal! But these trips only represent one piece of the puzzle of food security in our country—for many people, getting enough food just to work another day is a constant struggle.

So in a partnership with the Food Bank of the Southern Tier, our employees took on the role of businesspeople, store clerks, truck drivers and economists as they navigated the surprisingly complicated role that even staple foods like fruits and grains take as they go from farm to table. In front of a group of around twenty five students receiving mentorship and tutelage through Binghamton University's Promise Zone, they served as a visual aid to understand that the image of food coming from sunny farmlands in fields of grain is not entirely accurate. Afterwards, both our employees and the Promise Zone youths participated in a fun yet enlightening workshop called Hunger 101, which put them into the roles of people in a variety of financial circumstances that made getting enough food difficult. They navigated intractable social services agents, overpriced convenience stores and food pantries with inconvenient hours and ultimately came to see the challenges that keep even people considered "well off" from getting the

food they may need that day. It was a powerful end to the weeks of learning and service our employees took part in.

This year's Summer Youth Employment Program ended on August 8th, an event we commemorate with our Family and Friends potluck. It was a great, if not bittersweet, end to the program—we enjoyed great food, much of it made by our employees themselves, and celebrated the accomplishments and growth each of them experienced over the past few months. The attendance was incredible, with at least 35 people chatting, going on tours, sampling foods and learning more about vegetables and farming than they may have bargained for. It's in moments like this that we realize how small the Urban Farm really is: a half acre's worth of space seems hardly enough to contain everyone! After a few hours, we said our goodbyes, as life took our employees to the next stage in their lives. Some of our employees were moving on to the next grade in high school, others moving on to college, and some to places far beyond the city. But as they walked out of the gates, we hoped that the weeks they spent with us would have a profound impact on their lives for years to come. Whether it's through further interest in urban agriculture, a newfound desire to impact their community in a positive way, or just through making smarter decisions about the food they choose to eat, we're sure that our youth are now walking on a brighter path.