

Sarah Kirnon, Dig Deep Farm, 6-16-17

The idea of Dig Deep Farm is something that Captain Martin Nidafer (sp?) had talked about 7 years ago, when his team at the Alameda Sheriff's Department was looking at changing the whole Ashland/Cherryland neighborhood. He'd read a book by Van Jones and was really changed by it. They really wanted to see a shift in how people who were formerly incarcerated were entering back into society and they had access to this land, and he started forging relationships with the Alameda Fire Department that owns one plot of land that we sit on. He came up with this idea that a lot of people in corrections are fond of, because they want to see the prison population decrease. They saw with the REACH program that is just across the street, they saw the declining crime amongst teenagers over several years and they wanted to apply those same principles to the older prison population. So this program at Dig Deep Farm works with men and women who were formerly incarcerated and it gives them an 8-week curriculum in farming that will also put them in the line of moving into work. It might not necessarily be work on a farm, but it's a good place to start. Once you're coming out of prison, and you're starting to sew new seeds and making a change in your life, the analogy is very well linked.

It's made so difficult for people who have been formerly incarcerated to really turn their lives around. Especially, unfortunately, it's harder for folks of color to make the re-entry. Folks of color, poor people, people with no access to higher education...it's harder for them to come back in. So, something like this is soothing. It's hard work, but it's not demanding. You're dealing with growing something that has the potential to change somebody's life. We're working with the Alameda Food bank and one of the stated goals is working toward ending hunger by 2020. So, how are we going to do that? The fact that we still have to approach that in this day and age is still kind of scary. There are still people living in modern America who don't eat every day, who don't eat fresh vegetables every day. So when you put all of those pieces together, the dynamic of people re-entering the population, growing produce, all of these ways that the prison population is helping the workforce...Amazon has packing in the prisons. If we could apply that to other things...if we could have farming be a bigger part of that, there would possibly be less crime. There would possibly be less hunger.

I came into this job about a year ago. In the short time I've been here, I've heard people talk about taking a bag of fresh produce home once a

week, and how much it impacted their lives. That to me is beautiful, but it's also sad. I grew up eating healthy food. We had a piece of land in the back of the house I grew up in. You pulled stuff out of the ground and it ended up on your plate. It blows me away when I hear people talk about never having eaten fresh produce, especially when we sit in California, which produces so much.

This program, it's about empowering people, it's not just keeping people in a place where they're only getting a paycheck. It's about transition for folks who are looking to turn their life around.

As Dig Deep Farm grows, we hope to give people more permanent employment. But for now, we're only able to house about 8 people at a time. We're in between running a business and running a program, so trying to get that balance.

We're building a food hub. It's like a commissary kitchen. It's in an old local building that hasn't been used for eons. Once again, the sheriff's department was able to get the space, and we're building a kitchen and also a packing plant. So all the produce that we grow will be taken there and washed and packed and distributed back into the neighborhood.

The mission of Dig Deep Farm is to really impact from a social justice point of view, how we are going to change people's re-entry back into the population, people's relationship with food, how we're going to change the footprint of Ashland/Cherryland in terms of employment. This is a neighborhood that was once thriving because of the packing plants. Pepsicola was here. There were all these big companies employing thousands of people who are now unemployed. There are so many empty storefronts here. This place is a food desert. I have to make lunch every day because there is literally nothing available around here that is healthy to eat. I hate saying that. And then we wonder why the kids are eating Cheetos and slices of pizza for lunch and like that.

Why we're here and what we're going to do, it's going to be monumental. This food hub has the potential to employ up to 300 people. If we talk about farming, about having a small food program where we're teaching small businesses like the mom and pops around here who are making tamales and stuff like that, training them up at the food hub and then putting them in a small storefront here. The goal is that by 2019 or 2020, this Dig Deep Farm will have created at least 300 jobs.