

## Got Grub?

Women Changing the World, a group of Russell Sage students, helps bring fresh produce to the tenants of Joseph's House

**By Amy Halloran**

On Earth Day, you might have seen groups of college students cleaning up parks and empty lots. If you were in Lansingburgh, you might have spied young women from Russell Sage College installing a greenhouse in a courtyard garden at the Lansing Inn. The following weekend, the students returned to kit out the greenhouse with shelves and tend the plants.

The Lansing Inn is a branch of Joseph's House, a nonprofit that addresses homelessness in Troy. Thirty people live permanently in the former Phoenix Hotel. Located on a busy strip that is part commercial and part residential, the brick building has private studio apartments, and a large community room for shared meals and recreation. Meals are cooked in a well-equipped kitchen with a commercial stove and lots of tools. Outside the community room is a very green and floral garden with a gazebo and plenty of places to sit, installed when the building was renovated 10 years ago.

This bit of green has a long relationship with local colleges. Students from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute assembled many of its structures. On the first Saturday in May, a group of RPI students rest in the shade, having finished a morning of planting flowers and pressure washing the gazebo. The women from Sage are busy transplanting tomato starts in topsy-turvy holders, and working in the greenhouse that their class purchased. After watering seedlings, they come indoors to eat lunch with the tenants.

People wait in line for the staff to dish out hamburgers, hot dogs and chicken hot off the grill, as well as green, potato and macaroni salads. While the students and residents tend to sit by themselves, this particular bridge of the town-gown divide is pretty remarkable.

Women Changing the World has worked with Joseph's House as a community partner for three years; adjunct professor Christine Nealon chose the organization because it fit a number of criteria.

"They had a set time each day where everyone gathered for a meal, which would make it less intrusive for the students to get to know the guests. Plus, Joseph's House is right in Sage's backyard. It had all the right ingredients," Nealon explains while waiting for lunch.

While each term provides a different group of students, the focus of one class can piggyback the next. The fall semester's class looked at the causes of homelessness and launched an awareness campaign, which included selling T-shirts printed with the phrase "Got Shelter?" to fight stereotypes associated with the condition. When this spring class began getting to know the folks at Joseph's House by bringing desserts to group dinners at the shelter in downtown Troy, access to fresh fruits and vegetables struck them as the issue to target. As they studied how to get produce to the clients of Joseph's House, they launched their own campaign, printing T-shirts with the phrase "Got Grub?"

"We kept wanting to make food," says Dana Cafaro, one of the 25 students in the 400-level class. "We wanted to do a weekly dinner but we saw that would be an endpoint. We watched *Global Banquet* and *Food, Inc.* We wanted some way for people to control what they eat. We wanted them to have the power to do it themselves."

The garden project stems not just from the students, however, but also from the people who live at the Lansing Inn. Ideas that are invented for someone else often don't work, as frustrated parents and disappointed social workers know all too well. At a tenant meeting, Nealon discovered a number of people had gardening skills, but lacked resources for vegetable starts or containers. Capitalizing on these interests, the class started to investigate buying containers, but found that getting ones large enough to support vegetables would be too expensive. Further brainstorming led the group to shop for a greenhouse, and now the 10-by-10-foot structure sits in the yard. Money for the garden supplies came from T-shirt sales.

Tenants are excited about the project. After lunch, one avid gardener gives students tips on how to handle tomatoes. When the students aren't around, he and other resident gardeners take care of watering the plants and ventilating the greenhouse so it doesn't cook the growing food too soon.

"There's nothing like a fresh tomato with mayonnaise, a little lettuce and turkey bacon," says one tenant, who planted peppers, cucumbers and herbs in the greenhouse. When he lived in the country, he grew sweet corn.

"Our food budget is limited," says Charlie DeBrocky, director of operations for Joseph's House. We try to rely on what we get donated. When it comes to fresh fruits and vegetables, it's not going to happen, not at today's prices. So this is great."

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