

August 2016

Growing Food Equity: a Participant Observation Exploring the Role of Communication in a Nonprofit Organization's Work to Improve Food Access in Urban Areas

Samantha Jane Kaufman
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

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GROWING FOOD EQUITY: A PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION EXPLORING THE ROLE
OF COMMUNICATION IN A NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION'S WORK TO IMPROVE
FOOD ACCESS IN URBAN AREAS

by

Samantha Kaufman

A Thesis Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in Media Studies

at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

August 2016

ABSTRACT

GROWING FOOD EQUITY: A PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION EXPLORING THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION IN A NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION'S WORK TO IMPROVE FOOD ACCESS IN URBAN AREAS

by

Samantha Kaufman

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2016
Under the Supervision of Professor David Pritchard

This thesis explores the concept of food equity and a nonprofit organization in Milwaukee, Victory Garden Initiative, that is working towards food equity by increasing food access in the city. The work explores issues of inadequate food access, urban development, and other nonprofit organizations working towards food equity. Through participant observation and interviews with VGI, the researcher found that a small nonprofit organization like Victory Garden Initiative is still bound by time, financial, and staffing constraints. In order for nonprofit organizations to market and run effective programming, they need to be efficient with limited resources, take advantage of any research available, and consider other avenues like primary research or policy work.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor, David Pritchard, for all of his guidance and encouragement during my thesis work and during my time in the Media Studies department in general. His flexibility, curiosity, and attention to detail have made the twists and turns on the way to this thesis all the more interesting. He was the one who encouraged me to be assertive in my findings and trust the knowledge I acquired during my time working with Victory Garden Initiative. I would also like to thank Xiaoxia Cao. Her contributions to the Blitz campaign, my thesis, and other projects have been invaluable. Both Xiaoxia and David convinced me to continue on my academic journey, and I am so grateful for that.

Special thanks goes to Anne Bonds, for helping me find the people studying food in geography. Without her seminar course and her guidance, I would not have seen the many connections that exist between communication and geography, joined by the great unifier: food.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for their support. It isn't easy living with someone who is working on a thesis. I'd like to thank my husband, Steve Kaufman, for all his patience through the hurried dinners, mountains of books and papers, and erratic schedules. My parents, Sandra and Carl Dittloff, told me that I could do anything I set my mind to, and I'm happy to be proving them right.

I hope to continue making everyone I have thanked proud in the future. I dedicate this project to the person who would have loved to see me shine. Aunt Dot, this is for you.

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1 Introduction: A Journey to Good Food for All

A Privileged Food Landscape

My personal food map is intricate. If I plotted every restaurant, every store, every farmers' market, and every garden where my food comes from, my map would extend well beyond my neighborhood, well beyond my city, and well beyond my county. I am a white, female graduate student living in a neighborhood of Milwaukee that is growing and changing every day. I have a car, which means I can drive outside of my neighborhood to get food. I rent but have a backyard where I am allowed to grow food. I have enough money to buy food from restaurants or higher-priced grocery stores and cooperatives like Whole Foods and Outpost Natural Foods. I have never had to worry about whether I could afford food or where I could get food on any given day.

I found the "good food movement" through media. The term describes a consumption trend that prioritizes local, organic, humane, and sometimes family-farmed food.¹ People who participate in the good food movement are against conventional food produced on a large scale, also known as industrial food.² I watched *Food Inc.*, a documentary that exposed the dirty secrets

¹ "The Good Food Movement – Farm Aid," *Farm Aid*, accessed August 6, 2016, <https://www.farmaid.org/blog/the-good-food-movement/>

² Elizabeth Royte, "Street Farmer," *The New York Times Magazine*, last modified July 1, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/05/magazine/05allen-t.html>

of food production in the United States.³ The documentary included footage of the inner workings of industrial farms, including Perdue, one of the largest poultry suppliers in the country. Chickens on the farm were in dark, dirty rooms with no space to move. I could no longer ignore the way food was produced and distributed. I became uncomfortable thinking about eating chickens that had been cramped and neglected. I wanted to know that the food I was eating was healthy and ethical. Michael Pollan and Marion Nestle's books motivated me to shop along the perimeter of supermarkets and eat food that my great-grandmother would recognize.⁴ I went from buying food at larger supermarkets to shopping at small grocery cooperatives. I went to farmers' markets every week in the summer. I spouted quotes from my favorite food books and documentaries to anyone who would listen. I bought a Thanksgiving turkey from a local farm, and in true *Portlandia* style, I met the turkey months before I ate it.⁵ I was convinced that people needed to eat locally produced food, grow their own food, and buy organic for the world to be a healthier, more sustainable place. The problem was that I could afford to participate in the good food movement, but I ignored that many other people did not have that luxury.

The Price of the Good Food Movement

The good food movement is a trend with faults. To participate in the good food movement, consumers need to replace conventional produce and processed food with local, organic, whole alternatives. The movement ignores the barriers that prevent many people from getting any food on the table. Unprocessed food is often more expensive than processed food,

³ Robert Kenner, Elise Pearlstein, and Kim Roberts, *Food Inc.*, Netflix, Directed by Robert Kenner, Magnolia Pictures, 2009.

⁴ Michael Pollan, *Food Rules: An Eater's Manual* (New York: Penguin, 2009); Marion Nestle, *What to Eat* (New York: North Point, 2006).

⁵ *Portlandia*. "Farm." Episode 1. Directed by Jonathan Krisel. Written by Fred Armisen et al. IFC. January 21, 2011.

and organic food costs even more. Food touted by the movement also often takes more skill and time to prepare. Barriers of time, knowledge, and money are not often addressed by supporters of the good food movement, who might look down their noses at someone who buys a conventional carrot instead of an organic one.

Food as a Social Justice Issue

The problem with the good food movement is not the promotion of local, organic, fresh food. The problem is that not everyone has equal access to healthy, affordable food. Unequal food access is a problem in many urban areas in the United States, and my city, Milwaukee, is no exception. Like many other cities in the United States, it has many areas that are considered "food deserts," where low-income residents have low access to supermarkets. Even outside of these areas, many people have inadequate access to affordable, healthy food. To combat problems in the Milwaukee food system, urban agriculture is on the rise, and other small-scale interventions have popped up all over. Victory Garden Initiative is one of many gardening nonprofit organizations in the city. Farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture (CSAs), urban farms, and food cooperatives are becoming more common every year.

Everyone deserves equal access to healthy, affordable food because food is a social justice issue. Even with new alternative food programs increasing physical access to food, many Milwaukee residents still face barriers such as time to prepare healthy food, money to buy fresh produce, and knowledge of how to prepare the food they can buy. People might also lack adequate transportation to where "better" food is available in the city. People who are the least

likely to have access to healthy, affordable food are disproportionately poor people of color.⁶ If people do not have access to healthy food, whatever the barrier, they are more susceptible to health problems like diabetes and obesity. Improper diets can lead to poor school performance, which can limit future success. Healthier food can enable better performance in school, better health, and a better quality of life. Not addressing food inequity in a city such as Milwaukee can mean condemning people to inequalities in health, income, and quality of life, and perhaps even an early death sentence.

Communicating Social Justice

As an undergraduate, I studied how communication could change people's attitudes and behavior. After school, I spent five years working at an advertising agency. My experiences in school and work emphasized that communication could play an important role in increasing awareness, increasing knowledge, fostering resistance movements, and influencing consumer decisions.

When I returned to school to pursue a graduate degree in Media Studies, I volunteered with a nonprofit organization in Milwaukee that was working to improve food access for everyone in the city, regardless of income level. I believed that it was important for nonprofit organizations to communicate strategically in order to run successful programs, despite restrictive marketing budgets. Victory Garden Initiative is a gardening nonprofit organization that promotes growing food in the city through community gardens and individual garden beds. I was a committee member for the organization's 2015 Blitz event. I will talk more about Victory

⁶ "The Devastating Consequences of Unequal Food Access: The Role of Race and Income in Diabetes (2016)," *Union of Concerned Scientists*, accessed August 4, 2016, <http://www.ucsusa.org/food-agriculture/expand-healthy-food-access/unequal-food-access-race-income-diabetes#.V6Z1Q4MrLRY>.

Garden Initiative's background and the Blitz campaign in Chapter 2. I helped plan the marketing campaign for the event and engaged in participant observation, taking notes about how meetings ran and how marketing decisions were made. I wanted to know what role communication played in Victory Garden Initiative's goal of improving food access in Milwaukee, and how the organization decided how and what to communicate.

The goal of my research was to understand inequality in the food system, how nonprofit organizations were working towards food equity, and how a nonprofit organization planned a communication campaign. Chapter 2 includes background on food equity, urban development that led to inequalities in the food system, and one Milwaukee neighborhood in particular where people have inadequate access to food. The chapter includes some examples of nonprofit organizations working to improve food equity, as well as challenges nonprofits face in marketing and achieving their missions. The chapter ends with some background on Victory Garden Initiative, the nonprofit organization where I volunteered and engaged in participant observation. Chapter 3 describes the methodology behind the participant observation and interviews I conducted. Chapter 4 shares the results from my time with VGI. Chapter 5 serves as a discussion about what I learned, my suggestions for VGI, and possible next steps for my research.

2 Background: Food Inequality, Urban Development, and Nonprofit Organizations

Working Towards Food Equity

Striving for Food Equity

Unequal access to food continues in part because not all policies and nonprofit organizations are striving for food equity, but instead for equality. Equality means that the same offering is available to anyone in a certain group.⁷ For example, a food assistance program may give equal amounts of money to any family living below the poverty line. Giving families equal amounts of assistance means that all families in need receive the same benefit, but the money they have from income and food assistance in total is still unequal. Equity, on the other hand, would assure that families making less money would receive greater amounts of food assistance, so that all families in need would have a more equal amount of money in combined income and food assistance. Striving for equity means that distribution is done in a way that is fair, even if the distribution itself is unequal.⁸ Unequal distribution results in a more equal outcome.

Food Inequality

Unequal access to food can be attributed to a person's income, location, access to transportation, or a combination of all three. Poverty can prevent people from accessing healthy food. The city poverty rate for Milwaukee was 29 percent, according to 2014 US Census Bureau

⁷ Deborah Stone, *Policy Paradox* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012): 39-62.

⁸ Stone, *Policy Paradox*, 41.

estimates.⁹ The Applied Population Lab recorded Milwaukee County poverty rates at 22.5 percent in 2012.¹⁰ People in poverty are at a higher risk of being food insecure.¹¹

In 2012, 169,170 people living in Milwaukee County (17.9 percent of the population) were reported as being food insecure.¹² Food insecurity means that access to nutritionally adequate or safe foods is uncertain or limited.¹³ Not being able to pay for nutritious food, being physically far away from healthy food outlets, or having healthier food options nearby can all contribute to food insecurity. Households that report they don't always have the money to buy the food they need to feed their families are defined as experiencing "food hardship." Households in Wisconsin's Congressional District 4, located in part of Milwaukee County, reported the highest food hardship rate out of all Wisconsin congressional districts in 2011-2012 at 21.8 percent.¹⁴ Milwaukee County is located in Districts 1, 4, and 5, where food hardship rates are 13.7 percent, 21.8 percent, and 7.7 percent respectively.¹⁵ Milwaukee's Congressional District 4 also has the highest African American population in the state at 33.7%.¹⁶

⁹ Bill Glauber and Kevin Crowe, "Poverty Keeps Tight Grip on Milwaukee, New Census Figures Show," last modified September 16, 2015, <http://www.jsonline.com/news/milwaukee/poverty-keeps-tight-grip-on-milwaukee-new-census-figures-show-b99578039z1-327971271.html>

¹⁰ Wisconsin Food Security Project, Applied Population Lab, University of Wisconsin – Madison, accessed June 26, 2016, <http://foodsecurity.wisc.edu/>

¹¹ Curtis et al., "Poverty and Food Security in Milwaukee County," accessed June 26, 2016.

¹² "Map the Meal Gap – Feeding Wisconsin," accessed June 26, 2016 from http://www.feedingwi.org/data_research/mealgap.php

¹³ "USDA ERS – Food Security in the U.S.: Measurement," USDA, last modified September 2015, <http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/measurement.aspx>

¹⁴ "Food Hardship and Accessibility – Food Research & Action Center," accessed June 26, 2016 from <http://frac.org/test-food-hardship-data/>; "Food hardship" is determined by a "yes" answer to the Gallup poll question: "Have there been times in the past twelve months when you did not have enough money to buy food that you or your family needed?"; Katherine J. Curtis, Judi Bartfeld, and Sarah Lessem, "Poverty and Food Security in Milwaukee County, Wisconsin," accessed June 26, 2016 from http://www.apl.wisc.edu/resource_profiles/pfs_profiles/milwaukee_2014.pdf

¹⁵ Curtis, Bartfeld, and Lessem, "Poverty and Food Security in Milwaukee County, Wisconsin."

¹⁶ The Applied Population Laboratory, "Food Security Project," *Wisconsin Food Security Project*, accessed August 4, 2016, <http://foodsecurity.wisc.edu/help.php>

People who live more than one mile from a supermarket in an urban area are considered to have low access to a grocery store.¹⁷ In 2010, 13.1 percent of Milwaukee County households were reported to have low access to a grocery store.¹⁸ Low-income areas with limited access to food are sometimes defined as “food deserts.”¹⁹ The term does not encompass the complicated problems of food access and poverty. For example, neighborhoods where most residents live within a mile of a grocery store may still have problems getting food due to financial or transportation barriers. However, talking about areas as food deserts adds a sense of urgency to the geographical area being discussed. The term has been used to enact policies that affect the food system.

Milwaukee families used to rely more on local farmers for fresh food.²⁰ However, by 2012, for many inner-city families, food coming from local farmers constituted less than one fourth of one percent of the food they consumed.²¹ Residents in food deserts do not have adequate access to supermarkets, which means they often use liquor stores or convenience stores as primary food sources.²² Fresh, unprocessed foods do not have long shelf lives. They are often more expensive for consumers as a result. When people are on a tight budget, they usually eliminate fresh and unprocessed foods from their shopping lists.²³ Fresh foods are also less profitable for retail outlets to stock. Delivery and replenishment of fresh foods can be more

¹⁷ “USDA ERS – Food Environment Atlas,” last modified September 21, 2015, <http://www.ers.usda.gov/foodatlas/>

¹⁸ Wisconsin Food Security Project, accessed June 26, 2016.

¹⁹ “Creating Access to Healthy, Affordable Food,” accessed May 2, 2015 from <http://apps.ams.usda.gov/fooddeserts/fooddeserts.aspx>.

²⁰ Will Allen and Charles Wilson, *The Good Food Revolution* (New York: Gotham Books, 2012), 14.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 143.

²² Nathan McClintock, “From Industrial Garden to Food Desert: Demarcated Devaluation in the Flatlands of Oakland, California,” in *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class and Sustainability*, ed. Alison Alkon and Julian Agyeman, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 89-120.

²³ Elizabeth Eisenhauer, “In Poor Health: Supermarket Redlining and Urban Nutrition,” *GeoJournal* 53(2) (2001): 125-133.

expensive for corner store owners, who then pass the expense on to consumers. Corner stores tend to charge more and provide fewer food options to customers.²⁴

Living in high-poverty and low access areas has been linked to diet-related health problems like obesity, hypertension, and diabetes.²⁵ Low-income people living in concentrated urban areas are susceptible to contracting many illnesses as a result of poor food access, poor diet balance, or over-consumption of unhealthy foods.²⁶

Urban Development

The development of urban areas created many inequalities, including inequality in the food system. Milwaukee's urban development reflects trends in many other American cities, especially those in the Rustbelt. Increases in American industry led to increases in population. Milwaukee was the leading city for manufacturing in the United States in a number of industries, including motorcycles with Harley-Davidson and temperature regulators with Johnson Controls.²⁷

Urban development followed some basic expansion patterns that academics summarized as concentric circles, sectors, and other patterns moving outward from the city center.²⁸ The rise of car culture, urban freeways, and post-World War II prosperity contributed to urban expansion. Manufacturing work was still strong in Milwaukee after World War II. Unemployment was

²⁴ Eisenhower, "In Poor Health," 126.

²⁵ Hilda Kurtz, "Linking Food Deserts and Racial Segregation: Challenges and Limitations," in *Geographies of Race and Food: Fields, Bodies, Markets*, ed. Rachel Slocum and Arun Saldanha, (Farham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013), 247-264; Christine M. Olson and David H. Holben, "Position of the American Dietetic Association: Domestic Food and Nutrition Security," *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 102(12) (2002): 1840-1847.

²⁶ Kameshwari Pothukchi and Jerome L. Kaufman, "Placing the Food System on the Urban Agenda: The Role of Municipal Institutions in Food Systems Planning," *Agriculture and Human Values*, 16(2) (1999): 213-224.

²⁷ John Gurda, *The Making of Milwaukee* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 2008), 243.

²⁸ Ernest W. Burgess, "The Growth of the City," in *The Blackwell City Reader, 2nd Ed.*, ed. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 339-344.

about 2 percent in 1946.²⁹ As the economy prospered and the job market remained strong, families bought more cars. In 1910, one family out of 84 in Wisconsin had a car.³⁰ By 1930, that ratio became one to one. Twenty-nine percent of families in the greater Milwaukee area had two cars by 1965.³¹ People with cars were able to commute to work and live farther away from the city center.³² Expressways were built to accommodate the rise in cars. Construction on the first Milwaukee expressways started in 1952.³³ By the end of the 1960s, the city built 63.9 miles of freeway.³⁴

Increases in population and outward expansion meant that suburbs became the answer to overcrowding.³⁵ Private dwellings in suburban environments became the American ideal.³⁶ In Milwaukee, subdivisions used mass advertising to entice prospective residents, capitalizing on people's desire to do away with the old and embrace the new.³⁷ Middle- and upper-class families moved to the suburbs post World War II, where the lots were bigger and more accommodating to cars.³⁸

Segregation and inequality in cities increased with population growth.³⁹ Prosperity did not reach poor families in the city's center, who were relegated to deteriorating housing.⁴⁰ Growth patterns theorized by academics eventually contributed to redlining practices. The Home

²⁹ Gurda, 323.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 251.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 328.

³² *Ibid.*, 329.

³³ *Ibid.*, 332.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 334.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 246.

³⁶ Dolores Hayden, "What Would a Non-Sexist City Be Like? Speculations on Housing, Urban Design, and Human Work," *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5, no. 3 (1980): S172.

³⁷ Gurda, 250.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 329.

³⁹ John Logan and Harvey Molotch, "Urban Fortunes: The Political Economy of Place," in *The Blackwell City Reader, 2nd Ed.*, ed. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 398.

⁴⁰ Gurda, 321, 358.

Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) was designed by the government under President Franklin D. Roosevelt to address urban residents' needs to borrow money for housing.⁴¹ A rating system assigned color-coded assessments to neighborhoods. A green neighborhood was deemed as "in demand as residential locations in good times and bad."⁴² Blue neighborhoods were "still desirable." Yellow neighborhoods were seen as "definitely declining," and red neighborhoods were ones "in which the things taking place in [yellow] areas have already happened."⁴³ Once a neighborhood was given the lowest grade, even fairly new, high-quality houses there declined sharply in value.⁴⁴ Neighborhoods where black people lived in just about any amount tended to get lower ratings, and residents were stuck because they couldn't get mortgages or possibly move to higher-rated neighborhoods.⁴⁵ The HOLC assigned lower ratings to neighborhoods with black residents as a response to Homer Hoyt's model of neighborhood change.⁴⁶ Hoyt's research showed that black families first moving into white neighborhoods would have to pay a premium, raising housing prices, but that values would drastically decline afterwards. The HOLC took Hoyt's research and ran with it, using the theories to apply racial and ethnic worth to real estate appraisals.⁴⁷ Home loans were hard to come by for people in redlined areas and people of color. The Federal Housing Commission (FHA) and the Veterans Administration (VA) provided attractive loans to boost homeownership, but had restrictions on the types of homes, locations of neighborhoods, and racial makeup of neighborhoods where the loans could be applied.⁴⁸

⁴¹ Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*, (Oxford University Press, 1985), 196.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 197.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁴⁵ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 203; Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations," last modified June 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>.

⁴⁶ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 199.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 199.

⁴⁸ Gurda, 324.

Essentially, loans were mostly given to residents looking for homes in high-rated, homogeneously white neighborhoods.

As the black population increased, African Americans began moving into majority white portions of Milwaukee, causing panicked whites to sell their homes in what they perceived as declining neighborhoods so they could move to a suburb.⁴⁹ This white flight, coupled with discriminatory lending practices, severely limited where African Americans could live in Milwaukee. Civil unrest in the 1960s and early 1970s, as well as the 1976 initiation of mandatory busing to integrate the Milwaukee Public Schools, accelerated white flight.⁵⁰ Sprawl continued, this time turning farms into subdivisions in areas surrounding the city.⁵¹ The more the suburbs developed, the more socially distant residents were from the city and one another.⁵²

Shopping centers were built as a response to cars, causing economic downturns for commercial districts in city neighborhoods.⁵³ Grocery stores were cost-efficient, popular, and abundant in cities around the middle of the twentieth century, but by the 1970s, they were relocating to the suburbs to follow middle-class shoppers.⁵⁴ Prospective grocery owners in redlined urban areas, due to discriminatory lending practices, were denied loans to open new businesses, which exacerbated food access issues.⁵⁵ By the 1980s and 1990s, superstores that were accessible almost exclusively by car provided most food to consumers.⁵⁶ Not all people living in Milwaukee have access to a vehicle or have a supermarket nearby. Approximately

⁴⁹ Gurda, 362.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 382-383.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 383.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 385.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 329.

⁵⁴ "Introduction: Food Deserts," last modified September 1, 2014, accessed September 16, 2015, <http://www.whyhunger.org/getinfo/showArticle/articleId/981>; Geoffrey S. Becker, "Food Marketing in the Inner City: Trends and Options," *Report for Congress: Congressional Research Service*, Washington, 1992.

⁵⁵ "Introduction: Food Deserts," WhyHunger; Eisenhower, "In Poor Health."

⁵⁶ McClintock, "From Industrial Garden to Food Desert."

25,500 households in Milwaukee County, 6.7% of total households, have no access to a vehicle and live at least one-half mile from the nearest grocery store, supermarket, or supercenter.⁵⁷

While urban freeways increased mobility for families with cars and cut commute times for families working in the city and living on the fringes, they slashed wide gashes in inner-city neighborhoods. Thousands of Milwaukeeans were displaced from their homes, something the Expressway Commission deemed inevitable.⁵⁸ However, dissenters were vocal in the 1960s and '70s, arguing that expressways divided neighborhoods and increased movement to the suburbs.⁵⁹ After opposition erupted against the Park East, Park West, and Lake Freeways, Milwaukee County cancelled large portions of expressway in 1978.⁶⁰ The cancelled expressways could not reverse some of the damage already done to Milwaukee neighborhoods.

Washington Park

Washington Park is an example of a neighborhood in Milwaukee that has suffered from inequality because of urban development. The neighborhood is bordered on the north by North Avenue, on the east by 35th Street, on the south by Vliet Street, and on the west by the Stadium Freeway. The neighborhood started in the early 1900s, when the first homes were built.⁶¹ In

⁵⁷ “Food Access Research Atlas Data File,” accessed June 26, 2016 from <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/download-the-data.aspx>; “Food Access Research Atlas Documentation,” accessed June 26, 2016 from http://www.ers.usda.gov/datafiles/Food_Access_Research_Atlas/Download_the_Data/Current_Version/documentation.pdf; Michele Ver Ploeg et al., “Access to Affordable and Nutritious Food: Updated Estimates of Distance to Supermarkets Using 2010 Data,” last modified August 19, 2013, <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/err-economic-research-report/err143.aspx>

⁵⁸ Gurda, *The Making of Milwaukee*, 334.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 395.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 396-7.

⁶¹ “Washington Park Partners 2012 Annual Report,” accessed May 9, 2016, <http://nebula.wsimg.com/6b6ab41d7cae862b8f36fb8dafc5c716?AccessKeyId=E1CA34359400D8418511&disposition=0&alloworigin=1>

2014, approximately 12,500 people lived in the Washington Park neighborhood.⁶² The vast majority of residents are black (72 percent), followed by Asian (14 percent), and white (9 percent), with 5 percent of people in other race categories.⁶³ Median household incomes for census tracts in the neighborhood fall well below the city median (averaging \$24,340 compared to the city median of \$35,489).⁶⁴

Washington Park used to be a tourist destination in Milwaukee. It was easily accessible by streetcar. The neighborhood contained the Washington Park Zoo (the original Milwaukee County Zoo).⁶⁵ However, the neighborhood was not historically highly valued. The Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) classified Washington Park as security grade "C", or "yellow," in 1938, meaning the area was "definitely declining."⁶⁶ German immigrants, who either held blue-collar or clerical jobs, occupied the neighborhood in the 1930s, according to the documents accompanying HOLC maps. The streetcar that ran from downtown Milwaukee was decommissioned in 1959.⁶⁷ The zoo also moved to a new site the same year. After these two losses, residents and businesses started to move away from Vliet Street.

The Park West Freeway project also hurt development in the neighborhood. The freeway was planned to cut into the northwest corner of the Washington Park neighborhood and run along North Avenue on the northern border of the neighborhood.⁶⁸ The Park West project gained

⁶² U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2010-2014 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, generated by Samantha Kaufman, using American FactFinder, <http://factfinder.census.gov> (5 August 2016); Census tracts 90, 91, 96, 97, 98, and 122 were included in totals.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ "Accessibility," accessed May 10, 2016, <http://blcfieldschool2015.weebly.com/accessibility.html>

⁶⁶ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier; Map of Milwaukee County, Wisconsin: Residential Security Map, Milwaukee, Wis.*: United States National Archive, 1938, Accessed May 13, 2016, <http://collections.lib.uwm.edu/cdm/ref/collection/agdm/id/3028>

⁶⁷ "Accessibility," accessed May 10, 2016.

⁶⁸ "Washington Park / Park West Map," accessed May 12, 2016.

approval in the early 1960s, but before construction even started, many homes on North Avenue were demolished.⁶⁹ About 1,600 homes were already torn down to make way for the proposed freeway before the project was scrapped in 1977. Some of the changes that resulted from the clearance have been fairly permanent, as evidenced by land that continues to remain vacant and underdeveloped over 40 years later. The neighborhood was left with transportation, accessibility, and development problems.

Washington Park is just one neighborhood in Milwaukee where residents have unequal access to healthy, affordable food. The neighborhood has few grocery stores and many more corner stores. Residents in interviews have reported discontent in 2014 with what food options were readily available.⁷⁰ Figure 1 is a map of the various food sources available in Washington Park, gathered from the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee Buildings-Landscapes-Cultures Field School Food Survey, Google Maps, information on the Washington Park Partners' Facebook page, and Victory Garden Initiative (VGI) individual garden beds installed from 2013-2015.

⁶⁹ “Community Ties and the Legacy of Disruptive Forces,” accessed May 9, 2016.

⁷⁰ “Food Survey,” accessed May 9, 2016, <http://blcfieldschool2014.weebly.com/food-survey.html>

Washington Park Food Landscape

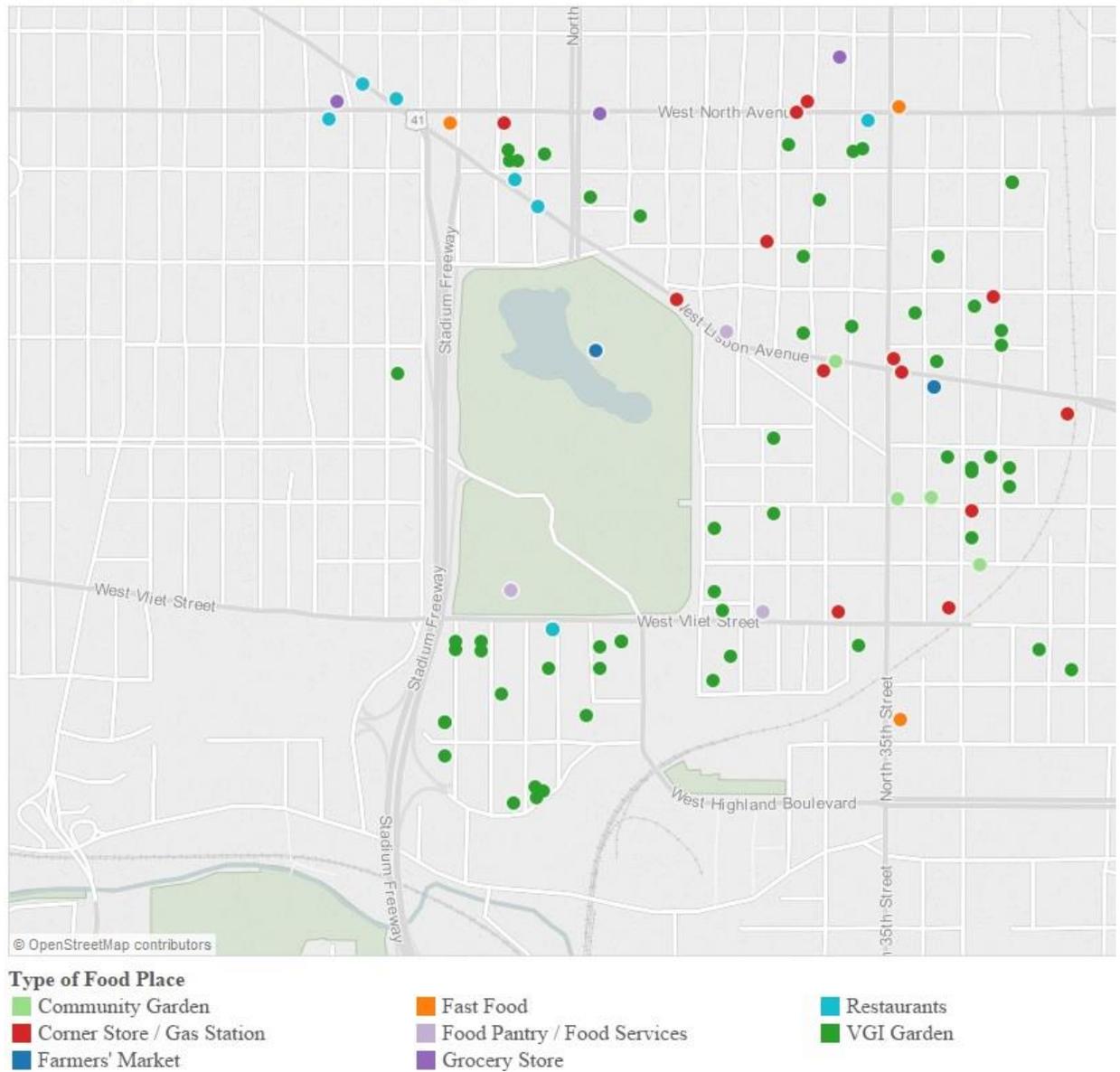


Figure 1. Washington Park Food Landscape

The closest grocery store to most neighborhood residents was Pick 'n Save on 35th and Meinecke. While it serves as an abundant and affordable resource for some, most people in the neighborhood do not have access to a car, making trips to grocery stores difficult.⁷¹ A new

⁷¹ Maia Stack, "Is Washington Park a Food Desert a Documentary by Maia Stack, 2014," posted July 2014, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=9UIT9JzQSiw>

grocery store opened in spring 2016, Boulevard Commons, located on 42nd and North. The new store is not close for residents who do not live on the north side of the neighborhood.⁷² Corner stores, on the other hand, are much more abundant, with nine in a one-mile square around Washington Park.⁷³ Residents use corner stores to buy snacks and quick foods. The stores are not a source for produce or affordable staples.

Residents who do have access to Pick 'n Save use the store mostly to buy meat.⁷⁴ The Pick 'n Save in Washington Park doesn't have a salad bar like similar stores in Wauwatosa, an area west of the neighborhood, leaving fewer fast healthy options for customers. Two other supermarkets used to exist near the neighborhood: Sentry on 22nd and Walnut and Kohl's Food Store on 35th and Juneau. Although the stores may have improved access in the area, they did not meet the same quality standards as Pick 'n Save and were not attractive options for buying food.⁷⁵ The lack of food businesses in the area, coupled with many of the residences having low incomes, makes Washington Park a neighborhood in need of greater food equity.

Nonprofit Work in the Food System

Working Towards Food Equity

In the face of changes in the urban environment, some nonprofit organizations have been working to improve food access. If nonprofit organizations see food as a basic human right, it is important to examine how these organizations work towards food equity, not just equality in

⁷² Washington Park Partners Facebook Page, posted April 27, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/washingtonparkpartners/posts/10154052714864854>

⁷³ "Food Survey," Accessed May 9, 2016.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

distribution. However, nonprofit organizations face challenges and limits that may inhibit the reach of their programs or marketing, and may keep them from achieving equity.

For a nonprofit organization to achieve food equity, the people the organization serves would receive goods and services unequally from the organization in order to reach a similar outcome. There are many different questions that can be asked to determine whether an organization is working towards food equity: Are the people most in need receiving the most from the organization? Do the people who can benefit most from the programs know about them? Are solutions to food problems being treated with a one-size-fits-all solution, or are there several programs in place to address food needs? Is the food culturally appropriate? How accessible are the nonprofit organization's programs?

Challenges to Outreach

Even when nonprofit organizations want to work towards food equity, they may face marketing challenges that get in the way of campaign success. Small, locally based nonprofit organizations can be most limited by time, money, and/or resources when they are working on a marketing campaign.⁷⁶ Nonprofit organizations may also run into resistance with boards and stakeholders who don't understand the importance of marketing, or may limit the budget allocated to marketing.⁷⁷ With limited budgets, time, and staff, nonprofit organizations may not be able to communicate to as many people as they would like, or achieve all the goals set forth in their mission statements.

⁷⁶ Jennifer A. Pope, Elaine Sterrett Isely, and Fidel Asamo Tutu, "Developing a Marketing Strategy for Nonprofit Organizations: An Exploratory Study," *Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing* 21 (2) (2009), 184-201.

⁷⁷ Ibid., Bernd Helmig, Marc Jegers, and Irvine Lapsley, "Challenges in Managing Nonprofit Organizations: A Research Overview," *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 15 (2) (2004): 101-116.

Two Nonprofits Striving for Food Equity

FoodShare's Good Food Box

FoodShare is a nonprofit organization based in Toronto. The organization was founded in 1985 as a relief service, coordinating with food banks, and has expanded to offer a variety of programs, including education, community gardens, research, business incubators, and youth training.⁷⁸ One of the organization's largest programs, the Good Food Box, started as an idea to deliver local produce to low-income consumers at low-income apartment complexes and senior residences, and evolved into a local produce box that gets delivered all over Toronto.⁷⁹ The boxes offer different options for different consumers, including different sizes, all organic, and all fruit.⁸⁰

While the Good Food Box is a consumer good, FoodShare is not looking to make a profit from the boxes. However, the organization cannot lose money, either. The program is funded in part by public funds and private donations.⁸¹ When possible, FoodShare buys from local farmers. The organization pays a fair price to support a living wage for farmers. FoodShare's priority to pay farmers a fair wage places limits on how affordable the organization can make the Good Food Boxes. The boxes do not reach the poorest of the poor in Toronto, because FoodShare cannot give them away for free without paying local farmers less or continuously looking for more funding.⁸² The tension between offering food to low-income people and paying farmers fairly keeps the Good Food Box from being fully equitable. However, more than half of the

⁷⁸ Josée Johnston, "Counterhegemony or Bourgeois Piggery? Food Politics and the Case of FoodShare," in *The Fight Over Food: Producers, Consumers, and Activists Challenge the Global Food System*, ed. Wynne Wright and Gerard Middendorf (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008): 105-106.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 107

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 107

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 107

⁸² *Ibid.*, 107-109

boxes distributed go to families who live below the poverty line.⁸³ Most of the volunteers who pack the boxes come from low-income households and receive boxes for their work as well. While FoodShare's Good Food Box has not achieved food equity, its programs work towards the goal of benefiting the most people with a range of options.

Growing Power

Growing Power is a prominent national nonprofit organization, founded in Milwaukee, that is leading the charge for urban agriculture. Founded by Will Allen, the company "hopes to create an alternative to the nation's centralized industrial food system."⁸⁴ Consumers can buy the organization's produce at farmers' markets, the on-farm retail store, or in affordable market baskets delivered to neighborhood pickup sites.⁸⁵ Milwaukee, Chicago, and Madison all have Growing Power farms. The organization was focused on scale in 2016, with the theme for all projects being "Let's Scale it Up!"⁸⁶ In 2015, Growing Power partnered with SYSCO, a major food distribution company, to deliver food across southeastern Wisconsin.⁸⁷ In the same year, the organization also built hoop houses (plastic structures that cover crops) for schools and companies, planted hundreds of trees in Milwaukee, and took on projects all around the country.

Will Allen built Growing Power to be an organization that grew food in urban areas where fresh produce was hard to get.⁸⁸ Growing Power prioritizes food access equity, as well as access to culturally appropriate food. The organization's original Milwaukee farm was built on

⁸³ Johnston, "Counterhegemony or Bourgeois Piggery?" 108.

⁸⁴ Eric Schlosser, Foreword in *The Good Food Revolution*, xiii.

⁸⁵ Roye, "Street Farmer."

⁸⁶ "Let's Scale it Up! Moving Forward in 2016," last modified December 15, 2015, <http://www.growingpower.org/2015/12/lets-scale-it-up/moving-forward-in-2016/>

⁸⁷ "2015 Growing Power Highlights," accessed June 15, 2016, <http://www.growingpower.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/2015-Growing-Power-Highlights.pdf>

⁸⁸ Roye, "Street Farmer."

two acres of land and included 14 greenhouses “in a working-class neighborhood on Milwaukee’s northwest side, less than half a mile from the city’s largest public-housing project.”⁸⁹ The closest grocery store to the housing project was over three miles away, leaving fast food restaurants and convenience stores as the only options for food. Allen wanted to change the system to ensure equitable and safe access to healthy food for everyone.⁹⁰ Allen has also hired people from the housing project to work on the farm, improving job opportunities for people in the neighborhood. Growing Power also offers what Will Allen calls “culturally appropriate food” at its retail store, like fried pork skin and collard greens.⁹¹ The organization doesn’t expect all people in a city to like the same foods, but instead offers foods that will attract different groups of people to the store.

Growing Power has worked hard to improve food equity in urban areas. However, the organization is not without its limitations. Allen acknowledged that some people are not able to grow their own food for various reasons.⁹² However, he has worked to bring people to the farm to engage in other community activities and participate in other ways. Much of what Growing Power does depends on volunteer work and foundation grants.⁹³ The organization also has employees to pay, so there are limits to how affordable food can be for consumers. Growing Power is an example of an organization working in the good food movement that acknowledges barriers in the food system while working to eliminate them.

Victory Garden Initiative

⁸⁹ Roye, “Street Farmer.”

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

The Victory Garden Initiative (VGI) is a Milwaukee nonprofit organization working to improve food access through gardening. The idea for VGI started with an act of resistance. Gretchen Mead, the organization's founder, built a raised-bed garden in the front yard of her Shorewood⁹⁴ home, an act that went against her neighbors' expectations of a grassy front lawn.⁹⁵ In May 2009, Gretchen got some friends together and built 40 gardens in one day, one of which was constructed between the sidewalk and the street. The land was technically village property and violated a growing ordinance. Gretchen's group of friends attended city meetings to fight the ordinance. The resistance gained enough attention that NPR picked up the story. The original activity started by a group of friends is now an annual campaign for VGI. Every May, staff and volunteers spend two weeks building 500 garden beds around Milwaukee. As of 2016, the organization has built around 3,000 garden beds.⁹⁶

For the Blitz, people can either place an order for full-price beds (\$160-175 depending on location as of 2016) or subsidized beds sponsored by neighborhood communities or organizations for low-income recipients.⁹⁷ Volunteers then install the beds and deliver soil during the two-week-long campaign. The wooden garden beds are 32 square feet. People who receive the garden beds can sign up to get a garden mentor who will teach them how to grow food. VGI, through partnerships with organizations like Habitat for Humanity, has placed a focus on Washington Park as one of the neighborhoods where it has subsidized garden beds.

As of 2016, VGI's office is located on Milwaukee's East Side. VGI shares offices with other Milwaukee nonprofit organizations working on environmental issues, clustered together in

⁹⁴ A suburb of Milwaukee.

⁹⁵ Alysse Gear, "Meet Gretchen: Changing the Food System in Milwaukee," *People with Panache*, last modified March 24, 2014, http://peoplewithpanache.com/gretchen_vgi/

⁹⁶ "Victory Garden Blitz," accessed August 4, 2016, <http://victorygardeninitiative.org/Blitz>

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*; personal communication with organization employees.

a group called the Milwaukee Environmental Consortium. The nonprofit also has 1.5 acres of land, Concordia Gardens, in the Harambee neighborhood, a low-income, predominantly black area.⁹⁸ People can rent garden beds in the garden and purchase produce grown on the farm at a weekly, youth-run farm stand.

In addition to the Blitz and Concordia Gardens, VGI runs a campaign every winter to gift fruit and nut trees to neighborhoods or community groups. The nonprofit also runs educational programs for youth and adults. People interested in starting an intensive project related to growing food can also join the Food Leader Certificate Program, a year-long commitment that includes retreats and individual-led projects assisted by mentors. VGI's work has mostly been in Milwaukee County, but the organization ran Blitz events in other cities, including Berea, Kentucky and Green Bay, Wisconsin.⁹⁹

VGI's mission statement includes the desire to build "a community-based, socially just, environmentally sustainable, nutritious food system for all."¹⁰⁰ VGI's vision also includes the desire to include everyone in the formation of the food system. The organization sees gardening as a way for people to connect with food at its source.¹⁰¹ The vision stresses the importance of being connected to the earth and the soil, and through the act of gardening, the connection will guide "our culture towards a sustainable, abundant future, freed from financial inequalities." The vision goes on to describe a utopian world that comes after the fall of industrialized food, with

⁹⁸ "LISC Sustainable Communities Initiative Neighborhood: Harambee," Milwaukee Sustainable Communities Indicators Monitoring Report, October 2011, accessed June 26, 2016 on <http://www.instituteccd.org/uploads/iccd/documents/harambee201111219.pdf>

⁹⁹ Camille, Interview with author, Tape Recording, Milwaukee, June 6, 2016.

¹⁰⁰ "Victory Garden Initiative – Home," accessed May 3, 2015, <http://victorygardeninitiative.org/>

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

"the reintroduction of food growing into our urban ecology," which VGI believes will create "a secure, sovereign, socially just and sustainable food system."¹⁰²

While VGI engages in many programs and Gretchen's goal is to keep expanding, full-time staff numbers are small. When I engaged in participant observation with VGI, I interacted with four full-time employees plus one temporary staff member working for the organization on behalf of Public Allies, a nonprofit apprenticeship program run by AmeriCorps. Three of VGI's full-time staff members were white women and one was a white man. The Public Ally representative was a black woman. Much of the work VGI does depends on volunteers. Hundreds of volunteers work for the Blitz annually. There are year-round opportunities for volunteers to work for VGI, doing both administrative work and manual labor. I first got involved with VGI as a volunteer, helping staff track web metrics. Later, I joined the Blitz committee to assist with marketing for the campaign, which was when I conducted my participant observation. I knew VGI wanted to change the food system, but I did not know how the organization promoted or planned for a large campaign like the Blitz, or what limitations existed in marketing and programming, until I joined the committee.

Research Questions

- How does a small nonprofit organization like VGI run a communication campaign?
- What are the goals of a campaign like the Blitz?
- What strategies did VGI use to communicate the Blitz? Why did VGI attempt to communicate in this fashion?
- How does VGI's work contribute to the concept of food equity?

¹⁰² "Victory Garden Initiative – Home," accessed May 3, 2015.

- What challenges or limitations does VGI face in marketing its Blitz campaign?
- How do people in neighborhoods of focus (like Washington Park) perceive VGI? What communication have they received?

3 Methods

I used participant observation during the planning of the Blitz campaign, from November 2014 through early May 2015. My research followed the practice of naturalism, where my findings and data collection evolved during the time I researched VGI based on what I found along the way.¹⁰³ Naturalism operates on the belief that different realities can come out of the same situation, that researchers are an interactive part of the situation, that feelings are bound by context and time, that causes and effects cannot be separated, and that objectivity is not possible.¹⁰⁴ My experiences and findings while researching VGI are unique to my reality. My time with VGI was spent observing and participating in one campaign and primarily with one full-time staff member. I understand that during my time working with VGI, I formed bonds with the people at the organization and cannot expect myself to be completely objective. However, I believe that the insight I gained from being so close to the organization was greater than any objectivity I may have lost from being as involved as I was.

I took notes in every meeting using either paper or digital note-taking methods. I later moved all field notes to typed digital copies. My notes included as much detail as possible. The notes were recapped to the best of my memory as soon as they could be recorded after meetings. By collecting this information, I hoped to paint a representative picture of the organization and planning that went into the Blitz. I also read books on participant observation along the way and articles about nonprofit communications campaigns to better assist Victory Garden Initiative in its campaign.

My notes started when my involvement started in the Blitz campaign, in November 2014. I wrote 36 entries between November 2014 and May 2015 at meetings with VGI, events I

¹⁰³ Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1985).

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., Dan Berkowitz, "Notes from the Newsroom: Reflecting on a Naturalistic Case Study," accessed August 1, 2016, <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED310478.pdf>

attended with VGI, and meetings with UWM faculty on campus and at VGI's office. I drew my findings from my notes and filled in any missing information by asking members of VGI direct questions. Out of my 36 field notes, 25 came from interactions with people working at VGI. The interactions included phone calls, online message exchanges, and in-person meetings. Most of my meetings were with one staff member whose primary job responsibility was to plan for the Blitz. The results I discuss in the next chapter come from my field notes, unless otherwise noted.

In spring 2016, I interviewed three employees at VGI. The interviews were conducted at VGI's office. My interviews covered the work the organization is doing in the food system, any Washington Park-specific work, how VGI communicates offerings to people in the Milwaukee area, and future plans for growth. All interview respondents have been given pseudonyms. VGI is a small organization and I wanted staff to be comfortable with being candid in their responses. The interviews serve in this thesis to fill in gaps I missed during my time engaged in participant observation.

Finally, I interviewed three people in Washington Park, all of whom do work in the food system. Two of the respondents run businesses in the neighborhood. David Boucher is the owner of Amaranth Café. Dan Bieser is the owner of Tabal Chocolate, which operates upstairs from Amaranth. Rosalind Cox is an active community member who works at a neighborhood food pantry and runs a community garden that operates in a lot next to her home. David and Rosalind live in the neighborhood. Dan had family that used to live in the neighborhood. The interview responses helped me see in a small way how communication of the Blitz and the program itself has been received by people who live in a neighborhood where residents receive a large percentage of subsidized beds.

4 Results

Campaign Planning for the Blitz

Informal Meetings

My first meeting with VGI employees to talk about planning for the Blitz was held at VGI's offices on the East Side in mid-November, 2014. As it turns out, most of the meetings (68%, 17 out of the 25) I took with staff members at VGI would be held in non-traditional settings and at nontraditional times instead of at VGI's main office during work hours. Most of the time, I met with one person to talk through campaign ideas. We met in coffee shops, bars, on the phone, on campus, or at people's houses. Generally, the non-traditional meetings that were conducted over drinks or breakfast tended to start a little late and bleed into social time afterwards. I regularly corresponded with the staff member through text messages, emails, Facebook messages, and phone calls outside of planned meeting times. Planning for the Blitz campaign was fluid and didn't end after typical work hours.

There were benefits and drawbacks to working with VGI through informal meetings. Informal meetings often become bonding sessions. I don't think I would have formed a friendship with the staff member I worked with if we had conducted all of our meetings at VGI's office. Bonding led to increased trust between the two of us, making it easy for me to access any data or resources I needed to help with the campaign or help my research. The staff member I worked with told me that everyone at VGI had access to the same data because the organization was small. If all employees can't access anything they might need at work, things might not get done in a timely manner. I was surprised as a non-employee to receive so much trust with access to data. I attribute some of that trust to how close I was with the staff member and other VGI employees.

Friendship, however, can come with a tendency to be too nice. When I worked in advertising, being too nice was a time waster. If people in a meeting did not like an idea that was being pitched, they would say they didn't like it and move on. If a project had a strict deadline, a project manager would be breathing down my neck to make sure I finished in time. When I was working with VGI as a volunteer, friendship paired with a voluntary position meant that things were more casual. One morning, the VGI staff member I was working with the most called me to go over edits for the poster we were creating. I was still waking up but told her I could jump out of bed to get them done. She told me not to worry and that she would call me later, leading to a greater delay in our work. I remember times I would present ideas for the campaign, and instead of outright rejection, I would see that the employees did not like the idea, but also did not want to hurt my feelings. They would add the idea to the list of considerations, even though it would never be used. It would have been more efficient to reject any weak ideas for stronger ones and move forward.

Nontraditional meetings led to out-of-the-box strategy sessions. At one meeting in late January 2015, I met with VGI employees at a residence and we engaged in a “yes, and...” planning session to brainstorm promotional ideas for the Blitz. The goal of the exercise was to start with one idea and allow someone else to take the idea and add to it, using an improvisational technique of saying “yes, and...” and tacking a new idea to the original. The exercise generated pages of ideas. However, most of the ideas did not end up getting used. While the strategy session was inspiring, and helped develop one idea we ended up using, it did not spur a lot of action after the meeting.

Informal meetings may generate good ideas and serve as good bonding sessions, but they can also be unstructured. Meetings would start with a small chat, which can happen at more

formal meetings, but the middle of the meetings would also often divert to talk about exciting projects down the road, instead of focusing on the tasks at hand. We usually came into meetings with tasks that we wanted to accomplish, but when we did not have formal agendas, or even when we did, the meetings lost focus.

Another drawback of the nontraditional meetings was that many things did not get done in a timely manner. Many of my field notes are about plans we had to finish a certain project in a short amount of time, only to follow up later with a note that the project was still not finished. Sometimes, this was due to the staff member I worked with having other things on her plate in addition to marketing for the Blitz. Other times, it was because we were waiting on approval from someone else in the office to move forward with a marketing item. Although I had access to what I needed, I could not finalize marketing materials without approval from at least one person at VGI. At the time, I noted that I believed it was a side effect of having some people work part-time on a voluntary basis for the Blitz combined with people working full-time in the office. Priorities were different between the different roles. It was harder for me as a part-time volunteer to get access to full-time staff who had a full plate as it was for approval or feedback. A month before the Blitz, we still did not have the posters done that we wanted to distribute much earlier, and that lag in production for the campaign was common with other elements as well.

Reliance on Partnerships

My job on the Blitz committee was to help VGI market the garden beds to consumers, especially people who would be buying full-price beds. The staff member I was working with, as well as other people on the committee, were also working on securing partnerships and sponsorships for the campaign. For the 2015 Blitz, many of the partnerships included in-kind

material donations. Companies donated lumber, wood screws, soil, heavy machinery, and signs garden recipients could place in their yards to advertise for VGI. Other partners provided cash which VGI could use for any needs that came up during the event.

Partnerships were also necessary for subsidized beds. VGI worked with organizations to determine how many beds they wanted to provide, and in turn the partner would offer a reduced rate to its networks. The partnerships were usually neighborhood associations or companies that worked with low-income households. The companies that provided subsidized beds also became indirect promotional partners. To show thanks for the partnerships, I helped VGI place logos at the bottom of the promotional posters we used for the Blitz. It was clear during my time working with VGI that partnerships were essential to the operation of the Blitz.

Nonprofit Responsibilities

In addition to VGI's need to secure partnerships, the nonprofit needs to reach out to volunteers, potential recipients of subsidized beds, members of the community, and donors. The VGI staff member I worked with recruited volunteers through email newsletters, Facebook posts, and community events. The Blitz was not the only program VGI was promoting during the time I worked on the committee, either. Concurrently with the Blitz campaign, VGI regularly promoted classes and events, shared information about gardening and healthy eating, and asked for donations. The Blitz campaign could not run without grants, which was also a staff responsibility to secure. VGI's marketing responsibilities extended well beyond the traditional for-profit marketing model of selling a product.

Goals for the Blitz

VGI staff members told me at our first meeting together that the primary goal of the Blitz would be awareness. VGI wanted to make sure people knew about the campaign. Donations were a secondary goal. I noticed other goals the organization had along the way through meetings and conversations. The obvious one was that VGI wanted people to buy the garden beds they were selling during the Blitz. It seemed to me as if VGI hoped that raising awareness would in kind increase the number of beds sold. Staff members also talked about the idea of trying for a number of gardens that, end-to-end, would be one-mile long. The number of beds needed for the informal goal would have been 660, a number that VGI had yet to reach in one year (in 2016, VGI broke its own record by installing 555 beds).¹⁰⁵ Another goal for the Blitz that was more implied than talked about was that the Blitz was a project that played into VGI's mission as an organization that "builds communities that grow their own food."¹⁰⁶ The more beds VGI sold, the larger the community would be of people who were growing their own food in the city.

VGI hosted a stakeholder meeting in February 2015 to drum up further interest and partnerships from organizations in the city. At the meeting, VGI presented why it does the Blitz. The list included benefits like improving access to food, bridging communities, reducing violence, and serving as a spiritual, healthy, ecological, artistic site in someone's yard. I often heard bigger-picture goals from VGI employees like the ones on the list than small, actionable goals for specific campaigns.

I was also never able to get employees at VGI to be more specific about goals. It was clear that people working at VGI wanted the Blitz to grow every year, so if the number was larger than

¹⁰⁵ "Victory Garden Blitz," accessed August 4, 2016, <http://victorygardeninitiative.org/blitz>

¹⁰⁶ "Victory Garden Initiative – Who We Are," accessed August 6, 2016, <http://victorygardeninitiative.org/mission>

the one before, the event would be considered a success. However, we talked about consumer models we liked and how we thought people would come to buying the beds more than planning actionable goals around what success would look like. Many of the goals VGI employees expressed during my time working with them were bigger picture, mission-based, and not focused on specific marketing objectives.

Communication Strategies

Communication strategies for a small nonprofit organization like VGI have to be creative. We had a small budget to work with, which we had to use to reach out to as many people as possible. Paid advertising included radio spots with a local station, print ads in local papers, and Facebook promoted posts. We also spent money on posters and flyers. VGI also had free forms of promotion through partnerships, sponsorships, and events with face-to-face communication.

Most of the work I did during the Blitz planning involved the posters and the Facebook posts. Our idea for the campaign was to promote the benefits of having a garden on Facebook and on the posters. We believed that if people knew more about the benefits of gardening, they would be more likely to buy a garden bed. We listed health, time, and financial benefits to gardening on Facebook posts and on posters. The messages were also framed using logical and emotional appeals. We initially created the messages this way because we wanted to test how different types of messages performed. The message appeals were tracked, but full testing was never completed due to time constraints. I will talk more about message testing in Chapter 5.

The VGI employee I worked with made most of the decisions about media placement and budget allocation. She chose where to market the Blitz based on budget, previous marketing years, or believed alignment with the target audience. For example, instead of advertising in the large, citywide paper, she advertised in a small neighborhood paper where she believed a lot of people would be interested in gardening and organic food, as well as a local natural health magazine. When I created the Facebook advertisements, I targeted them based on location (people who lived in the Milwaukee area) and interests (organic food, gardening, Whole Foods, etc.) to ensure I would get people who are likely to be interested in gardening.

Although some of the planning sessions offered out-of-the-box ideas for marketing, the campaign ended up being more traditional. At the brainstorming session in February 2015, we had more unique ideas like flash mobs, car magnets, mud or moss stencils, and a poster scavenger hunt. Because I was only a part-time volunteer with VGI, I cannot say with confidence why these ideas did not get implemented. It was likely due to a combination of time, resource, and budget constraints, along with some possible rejections from other staff members.

The most unusual idea we ended up going with was creating a series of Vine videos to promote the Blitz. We collaborated with an event called “Making About” and spent a day with volunteers, guest speakers, and a Vine expert making six-second videos about food. Participants tagged the Vines with #vgiblitz. Because of the volunteers involved and another organization running the event, the connection between the Blitz and the Vines was not always clear.

When I interviewed VGI employees in June 2016, I asked them what communication strategies they valued the most and deemed most effective. All the employees I interviewed believed that face-to-face interaction and word of mouth were the most impactful communication

methods for getting the word out about the work VGI does. Nicole handled much of the marketing and communication tasks for VGI.¹⁰⁷ She told me that she and other employees use posters, event attendance, magazines, newspapers, radio shows, Wisconsin Foodie (a local public TV show), Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, phone calls, and an email newsletter with a circulation of about 10,000 to market to people. However, Nicole believes that the most effective form of communication involves going door-to-door or engaging in other interpersonal communication. The other employees I interviewed also believed that having in-person visibility is crucial to VGI's communication strategy. While in-person communication might be the most effective for VGI, it is far from efficient.

Food Equity and the Blitz

The Blitz is a campaign that works to improve the food system, but it is also designed to improve food equity. While VGI does sell full-price beds (\$160 as of 2016), the organization subsidizes many of the beds it sells each year at very reduced prices. If another organization is involved in the area and can fund garden beds, more subsidized beds go to those neighborhoods.¹⁰⁸ The organization works with people to give them gardens at prices they can afford, even if it means payment plans of a few dollars per month.¹⁰⁹ In this way, the organization is helping the people most in need by offering a sliding scale. VGI needs to sell full-price beds. However, the only way people can get garden beds during the Blitz is if they have space for the beds. Usually the beds go to homeowners, and only occasionally renters with

¹⁰⁷ Nicole, Interview by author, Tape Recording, Milwaukee, June 2, 2016.

¹⁰⁸ Helen, Interview by author, Tape Recording, Milwaukee, 2, 2016.

¹⁰⁹ Nicole.

understanding landlords. VGI has installed some beds at apartment complexes, but not many.¹¹⁰ The Blitz is not set up to serve the poorest people in Milwaukee.

The Blitz is a one-size-fits-all solution to food access inequality in Milwaukee. VGI wants people to grow their own food. The organization has other programs with similar aims (growing orchards, educational classes about growing food), but not much for people who do not want to or cannot grow their own food. VGI has a farm stand where it sells produce grown at Concordia Gardens. People can pay what they can afford at the stand.¹¹¹ While the farm stand offers another solution to the problem, the Blitz is not as flexible.

At my first meeting with VGI employees to talk about the Blitz in November 2014, we had discussed approaching low-income bed recipients with different messaging than recipients of full-price beds. The idea ended up going by the wayside. Most of the outreach to low-income recipients came through partnerships with organizations for subsidized beds. If people were not connected to the organization, they might not know about the subsidized beds. VGI has the goal of subsidizing half of its beds every year, but those beds are going to the people who are hardest to reach.¹¹² While VGI strives for food equity in terms of affordability and access, there are limits to what the program can do because of budget, staffing, time, and spatial limitations.

Challenges and Limitations in Marketing the Blitz

The challenges and limitations I experienced while working at VGI are reflective of what other nonprofit organizations experience: limits of time, money, and resources. Many of my field notes included questions that never got answered, or plans that were never implemented. The

¹¹⁰ Camille, Interview by Author, Tape Recording, Milwaukee, June 6, 2016.

¹¹¹ Nicole.

¹¹² Helen.

full-time employee I worked with was also working on other projects. We had deadlines to meet before the campaign launched. Many of the plans we had ran up against the clock. There were not enough hours in the day to do as much as we wanted with the campaign. Staff members also did not have enough time to follow up properly on the gardens from previous years. In 2013, VGI sent out a survey and received responses from 100 gardens. The following year, another survey went out, with a much lower response rate.¹¹³ VGI could learn more from in-person interviews and following up more aggressively with surveys, but employees are strapped for time.

Before I volunteered with VGI, I worked for an advertising agency. I was used to working on campaigns with large, sometimes multi-million dollar budgets. However, I had also worked as the marketing manager for a nonprofit theatre company, so I knew to lower my expectations. Small nonprofits struggle with equally small budgets, and VGI was no exception. Marketing in a nonprofit organization is already a hard sell, because people give money to nonprofits to do their mission, not market. What I heard from VGI employees was similar to what I have read in background literature. In my interviews with VGI, employees said that they depend on grants to carry out programs. In order to get grants, the organization has to market itself of being worthy of grants.¹¹⁴ VGI also has to sell full-price beds to keep the Blitz going and to help subsidize beds for low-income recipients, even with grant and partnership support.¹¹⁵

A lot of the work VGI did, especially during the Blitz, was dependent on hundreds of volunteers. Volunteers built the beds, filled them with soil, painted signs, and carried out other

¹¹³ The staff member I worked with told me in December 2014 that out of the 300 surveys she sent out, she had received 8 responses back.

¹¹⁴ Helen.

¹¹⁵ Camille.

various tasks during the campaign. VGI's full-time staff, on the other hand, was small. During my time working on the Blitz, and when I interviewed VGI staff later, I heard ideas for large-scale, long-term projects from everyone. Ideas included taking VGI programs national, opening a co-op, starting major research projects, and building an app. Volunteer help can only take an organization so far. For big-picture projects, VGI needs full-time staff, and when I was there, that was a limited resource.

Perception of VGI from Washington Park Stakeholders

Over the years, VGI has focused on different neighborhoods of need and partnered with organizations to offer subsidized beds. Washington Park was one of those neighborhoods. In 2016, about 90 percent of the beds in the neighborhood were subsidized.¹¹⁶ I asked some stakeholders in Washington Park (business owners and active community members) how they perceived the work VGI was doing in their neighborhood and what communication, if any, they have received from the organization. The interview respondents were aware of VGI, but wanted to see the organization build a better relationship with the community and support community gardening. Dan Bieser, owner of Tabal Chocolate, and David Boucher, owner of Amaranth Bakery, both believed VGI was not engaged enough with the Washington Park community. Dan said that the garden beds he saw that were installed by VGI looked like “wooden boxes with empty dirt.”¹¹⁷ David Boucher was likewise critical of what looked like a patch of weeds to him, something that resulted from VGI coming in and out of a neighborhood and not staying to build

¹¹⁶ Helen.

¹¹⁷ Dan Bieser, Interview by author, Tape Recording, Milwaukee, June 7, 2016.

lasting relationships with members of the community.¹¹⁸ Both business owners stressed the importance of creating relationships when carrying out work in the food system.

Rosalind Cox was more positive about VGI and saw any gardening as beneficial to the community. However, she was more supportive of community gardens than individual gardens. When I asked her how she felt about individual garden beds, she said that it sounded good for the person who receives the bed, but that it would not be beneficial for the community.¹¹⁹ She would like to see community opportunities for gardening advertised by VGI as well for people who cannot grow food in their own yards.

¹¹⁸ David Boucher, Interview by author, Tape Recording, Milwaukee, June 8, 2016.

¹¹⁹ Rosalind Cox, Interview by Author, Tape Recording, June 16, 2016

5 Discussion

Food should be treated as a social justice issue, with food equity as the end goal. Nonprofit organizations like Victory Garden Initiative are working to promote food equity, but they have limited time, budget, and staff. Tension will always exist between the need to be profitable enough to keep a program going and offer goods and services to people most in need. In order for a small nonprofit to be successful at promoting food equity, it needs to be efficient with its limited resources while prioritizing those most in need. Small nonprofit organizations could do more by using research to guide campaigns, engaging in policy work, and knowing what people need before implementing programs.

When I worked with VGI, I heard about surveys the organization had conducted, or that other groups had conducted on its behalf, but I was not aware of any place where all of the research was available and summarized. I also wanted to conduct some research of my own. I was curious to see whether a logical or emotional message appeal would be more effective in getting people to buy gardens. We were not able to carry out the experiment in full due to time constraints, but it is a future research project I am planning on doing. I believe that research about what marketing techniques work best for small nonprofits, and research about past successes unique to a particular nonprofit, are essential to being efficient with limited resources.

VGI is an organization that came from an act of resistance. Gretchen Mead and her friends resisted policies and fought for new ones when they started building gardens in front lawns and parkways. I have heard Gretchen say in presentations that VGI does not work within policy, but I do not see why not. If VGI could convince the city to subsidize garden beds, or encourage landlords to let renters grow food on their property, or offer incentives for corner

stores to sell fresh produce, it would achieve its mission on a larger scale, without having to ask for as many small grants. Engaging in policy could mean that VGI would be able to expand its work quicker than its current pace.

Moving forward, I want to find out more about what people think of organizations like VGI. I would also like to know what people would like to see happen in the food system in their communities. I started interviewing Washington Park stakeholders out of this interest, but I would like to talk to more “ordinary people,” who are even less likely to hear about programs available in their neighborhoods. When an organization like VGI best matches the needs of the people, it is more likely to continue to be a successful organization. VGI has worked to improve food equity with the Blitz, but there is always more a nonprofit organization can do to work smarter with the resources at hand.

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