

# Overseas volunteers help tend Detroit community garden



[Mark Hicks](#), The Detroit News 11:30 p.m. EDT August 12, 2015



(Photo: Photos by Steve Perez / The Detroit News)

When Fiona Spindeldreier decided to leave Germany and spend more than two weeks in Detroit working with other foreign volunteers in an alternative “summer camp,” she repeatedly was asked: “Why?”

The recent college graduate heard about the city’s economic problems, crime and other issues. But she was committed to learning more about its revitalization up close while helping out.

After long days laboring in a community garden on the east side through the nonprofit Action Reconciliation Service for Peace, befriending residents, visiting cultural sites, interacting with artists, activists and educators, a new view emerged.

“It’s really a lovely city,” Spindeldreier, 23, said. “I was able to see what happens in the city — there’s a lot going on.”

Building bonds and changing opinions of an often-misunderstood area defined the camp, called Growing Together Detroit, which ended Tuesday.

It was the first one offered in the city and among a handful the nonprofit has coordinated in the United States, said Mark McGuigan, U.S. program director for the group, which is based in Germany and has offices in Philadelphia. A second Detroit camp is planned for next year, he said.

Throughout the effort, the group of volunteers — mostly foreigners, and some Americans — worked with the Eden Gardens Block Club, which unites Isaac Agree Downtown Synagogue members and residents on Detroit's east side to maintain a community garden.

But tending plants and cleaning around blighted properties was only part of the camp. The participants also examined Metro Detroit's history, culture and conditions through stops to the sites such as the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, a bike tour, exploring downtown and more, said Andrea Moellering, a program coordinator.

The aim was to foster connections and enhance the community there through a more interactive volunteer experience, McGuigan said. "It's an opportunity to experience part of America that you don't experience as a tourist or a consumer of popular culture. For the community itself, it's the engagement of outsiders. ... It's about an engagement between people and working together for something positive."

The Detroit project emerged through numerous ties. The nonprofit, which group officials said Protestant Church of Germany members founded in the 1950s as a sign of taking responsibility for acts the Nazis committed, has an international program. Volunteers pursue various educational, historical, political and social projects, McGuigan said. For the last several years, the nonprofit has had one working through the Holocaust Memorial Center in Farmington Hills.

While serving there in 2013-14, German native Richard Bachmann said he linked up with another volunteer opportunity in Detroit and noticed a lack of interaction between participants and neighborhood residents. Already having joined one of Action Reconciliation's international summer camps, which promote intercultural understanding, Bachmann hoped to pursue a similar project in Detroit.

Once nonprofit leaders supported it, Bachmann and Moellering spent months developing the effort and connecting with group partners.

The project attracted volunteers such as Arnon Shaked, an Israeli native in his 20s who had never visited the United States. He welcomed sweating through hot days to help pluck crops in Eden Gardens for neighborhood residents and toiling alongside youths in a city summer employment program. "Together we actually can do something much bigger than alone," he said during a potluck last week at the Repair the World site in southwest Detroit.

Community members also "really, really enjoyed" the exchange, said Karen Chava Knox, president of the Eden Gardens Block Club. "This is wonderful because it opened up the eyes on both sides."

Leonore Kriegel, 20, another German volunteer new to Detroit, grinned when discussing her experience.

"What I really liked about the city is that it's still in its building process. So much is going on ... so many people getting their powers and energies in the city to rebuild it and make it a better place," she said. "It's so refreshing. ... It's really good to be in a place and have your own experience before you judge anything."