"Growing Together Detroit" - You Can Only Grow When You Know Each Other

Almost one year of preparations, including the exchange of countless emails, numerous calls, meetings in person or on skype, to-do lists, ideas, revisions, frustrations, joy, and excitement all culminated on July 25 at 7pm: With a pizza dinner we kicked off the Growing Together Detroit summer program. For the first time we were able to bring together volunteers from Germany, Israel, and the US in Detroit this summer to work with the neighborhood association Eden Gardens Block Club.

The people who make up Eden Gardens have dedicated themselves to rejuvenate their neighborhood of three blocks on the East side of Detroit. This part of Detroit has been especially hard hit by the economic downturn of the city over the past decades. But as we learned from the very first day of the program on, Eden Gardens has already made a lot of progress—despite the obstacles and challenges they are facing. They have created a sizable community garden for the neighborhood and cleared several properties which had been neglected for years, were overgrown with brush, and often littered with trash. Now, fresh vegetables such as beans, squash, or lettuce grow there. Eden Gardens has erected a rain catchment which is currently being decorated by the children who regularly come out to help with the gardening. As Karen ‘Chava’ Knox, the energetic president of Eden Gardens Block Club, told us: “The children are our biggest asset here.”

Over the next two-and-a-half weeks, we were honored to work shoulder-to-shoulder with them as well as 25 students from Detroit Public Schools who worked with Eden Gardens over the course of the summer. Together we cleared a whole new plot for the garden and cleaned up adjacent properties. We could get our hands dirty on all kinds of gardening equipment, for some of us the first time ever we were able to do so. We cut down brush and trees, mowed the grass, pulled out weeds, picked up trash, and put everything on the curb. At the end of each day, we could see what we had achieved and that was the biggest motivation to get up early the next day to start all over again.

An important goal of the program almost happened organically: interpersonal exchange. While working together in the garden, conversations sprung up naturally. Through those, we were able to get a better sense of who the people are we worked with. We got to know Chava, Ruby, Miss Pauly, Al
and Cliff from Eden Gardens, joked around with Antwoine, Jasmine, and the other kids who came down to the garden, and had the chance to talk to even more people from the neighborhood during the two BBQs we organized together at the garden. Getting to know each other is a first and, in fact, essential step towards a more emphatic approach of volunteering and civic engagement. After all, the program aimed to encourage to “grow together” and you can only grow together when you know each other.

To allow us to get a better understanding of the socio-economic, cultural, and historical context of the Eden Gardens neighborhood and the city of Detroit, we met with educators, activists, and Detroiter of different walks of life who shared their perspectives with us. We visited the Detroit Historical Society and Charles Wright Museum of African American History to learn more about a key moment of Detroit’s history: The rebellion|riot of 1967. On a tour of Detroit’s east side with Rich Feldman from the James and Grace Lee Boggs Center we explored more grassroots efforts by Detroiter aiming to rejuvenate their communities. We went to the Holocaust Memorial Center to met with Rene Lichtman, a Holocaust survivor who later on was active in the anti-war and civil rights movement in Detroit. At the Isaac Agree Downtown Synagogue we prepared the Shabbat dinner and participated in the services. We met with Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan and had dinner with Detroit Deputy Major Isaiah McKinnon and German Honorary Consul Fredrick W. Hoffman. And from Maureen Linker from the University of Michigan, Dearborn we learned about the importance of “Intellectual Empathy” for social justice and mutual understanding.

Naturally, we did not miss out on the fun things to do in Detroit. Thanks to Ben from Repair the World Detroit, we enjoyed a perfect summer evening at Comerica Park watching the city’s famous baseball team, the Detroit Tigers. Furthermore, we visited one of America’s biggest farmers markets at Detroit’s Eastern Market, did a bike tour of the city with Harriet Saperstein who used to work as an urban planner for the city of Detroit, or went swimming in the Detroit River on Belle Isle, Detroit’s beautiful island park. In fact, the sunny summer weather allowed us to spent a lot of time outside, sometimes armed with delicious ice cream from the Mexican ice cream parlor down the street.

Two and a half weeks went by quickly, filled with activities, working in the garden, and encounters. During this time we might have missed out on sleep but we also had the chance to connect with the people we worked with and the city that hosted us. And those connections allow us to not only preserve our time in Detroit as a cherished memory but let it shine into our present.

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