GRASSROOTS GARDENS WNY

2024 ANNUAL REPORT

GROW HEALTHY FOOD • **HEAL** SYSTEMIC HARM
STRENGTHEN NEIGHBORHOOD CONNECTIONS

Artwork by The Left-handed Bandit
@lfthandedbandit

From the desk of the Executive Director...

Down the street from our office on Broadway, there's a beautiful mural on the side of a building a few doors down from where Buffalo's Michigan Street African American Heritage Corridor. A raised fist extends fiercely towards the sky, framed by a powerful statement: **"The greatest lie communities are told is that someone else is coming to fix their problems."**

This simple and profound declaration is at the core of the existence of Grassroots Gardens. From plant swaps and seed sharing to rallying neighbors for vacant lot cleanups, community ownership and agency has been both the goal and also the driving force that has sustained our gardens since even before the incorporation of our organization in 1995. For nearly 30 years, we've been proud to partner with and support those who answer the needs of their neighborhood, their school, their church, by planting gardens that proclaim hope while nourishing the body and the spirit alike.

In 2024, we shared this approach to an even broader community, establishing a formal volunteer program for the first time. We connected individuals with neighborhoods in need, taught gardening and stewardship skills, and shared ideas and histories of community ownership of public land.

Our volunteers, in return, moved tens of thousands of pounds of soil and compost, removed invasive plants, built tall accessible garden beds, improved pollinator habitat, pruned trees, and even built birdhouses to donate to our gardens, all the while building new relationships with each other and our gardener community.

Through it all, our 100+ community and school gardens - and the gardeners who lead them - remain the backbone of our organization, demonstrating the resilience of those who are determined to roll up their sleeves and get the job done, day after day. We are grateful for you, our friends and partners. Because of your support, our community elders can have fresh produce delivered to their door by their neighbors; our young people can learn patience and wonder in nature; and we can continue to know, confidently, that the solutions to our problems already exist in communities - we just might need to dig a little to find them.

TIMOTHY CHEN

Executive Director

New Beginnings: Lincoln Memorial United Church Community Garden

Story by Nina Coscia

The community garden at Lincoln Memorial United Church is one of the most ambitious growers in Grassroots Garden's network. With a staggering 23 raised beds, the garden has 709 square feet of space for fruits and veggies. All 23 beds and a perennial space are carefully squished in a narrow strip of land, where the garden's dense plants give it a feeling of life and abundance.

While caring for such a space is no easy task, Diane Cadle has tended to the garden with great results for around 20 years. Education about gardening and fresh food is central to Diane. Growing up, she learned gardening from her mother. When she had her own son, she loved picking strawberries to make his favorite preserves. Later, Diane used her passion to start a children's garden at Lincoln Memorial United Church. The garden eventually went dormant after a few years due to too much tree shade and stubbornly hard ground.

A few years later, a fellow congregation member suggested joining Grassroots Gardens, leading to the revitalization of the space today and the installation of many raised beds that yield large harvests each year. The children quickly took to the garden again. Diane said, "They just love to watch things grow; and when they start young, they end up having a love for it for life." They enjoy picking out plants, growing from seeds, and eating fresh food during their Sunday lessons.

This year, the kids grew so many pumpkins, melons, and mini tomatoes that they had to expand to another garden bed! Members of the congregation, neighbors, and a Quaker group care for the other beds, following Diane's goal of "involving as many people as we can involve."

The huge yield is generously shared, taken home by children and adults alike. During the pandemic, Diane and other leaders at the church organized a regular distribution of fresh produce from the garden to the church's seniors. Harvests have also been shared with food pantries such as the First Fruits Food Pantry and utilized in cooking classes.

> *"[the youth] just love to watch things grow; and when they start young they end up having a love for it for life."*

Diane has seen firsthand what sharing and education in the garden can foster. A favorite moment of hers is when she met a mother and her son in the garden this summer. They were passing by for a music lesson at the church when they spotted Diane and asked her questions about the garden. The pair ended up being sent home with a large amount of green beans and cooking tips from Diane, who was surprised when the young mother said that she had never prepared fresh green beans before. When the pair returned for their next music lesson a few weeks later, raving about the green beans, Diane, of course, took the opportunity to share some okra and Swiss chard with them.

"It's important to share these things, to teach the next generation," she said, "we want people to cook and have food they've never been able to have before, and to have their own gardens at home."

More cooking classes and chances for kids to watch the seedlings grow are planned for next season. She and a friend recently filled half of a bed with strawberry plants - a favorite of the children - so she can again share her son's favorite sweet strawberry preserves.

Growing Gardens, Growing Communities: Volunteers take on Grassroots Gardens

The 2024 season marked a successful, inaugural year for Grassroots Gardens WNY's formal volunteer program, thanks to the generous support of the Stenclik Family Charitable Fund, which welcomed neighbors from across Western New York into gardens for special projects, educational opportunities, and seasonal workdays. In total, **more than 100 volunteers invested a cumulative 400+ hours of service into our community gardens!**

"We've often received requests from neighbors outside the city looking to connect with gardens or trying to contribute their skills to existing spaces," said Sylvin Ashbrook, land stewardship coordinator and organizer of the GGWNY volunteer program. "Through this new initiative, passionate volunteers can share their talents in gardens across our network. We're opening the door to new friendships, unlocking new skills, and performing impact projects in gardens that request a little extra help."

The volunteer opportunities offered through the program complement current activities in community gardens: larger construction projects, pruning plants for stronger growth, or providing specialized native flora/fauna care. Each volunteer session is designed to include an educational component, sharing skills that could benefit all gardens.

To ensure the program's long-term stability, Grassroots Gardens WNY welcomed the experts at VIA Evaluation to oversee the creation of a logic model for the volunteer initiative. First-year volunteers, community gardeners, staff, and board took part in the discovery sessions.

We extend our thanks to the many volunteers who joined us throughout the season!
If you are interested in joining a volunteer session, visit our website at **grassrootsgardens.org/volunteer** to see current opportunities!

Cultivating Curiosity:
Expanding our School Gardens!

For the past 15 years. Grassroots Gardens' School Garden Program has served schools within the City of Buffalo, and later Niagara Falls, partnering with teachers and instructors to create opportunities for hands-on experiential learning and peer mentorship, building garden spaces for connections to healthy eating habits, creative cooking opportunities, and introducing young people to the wonders and importance of our natural world.

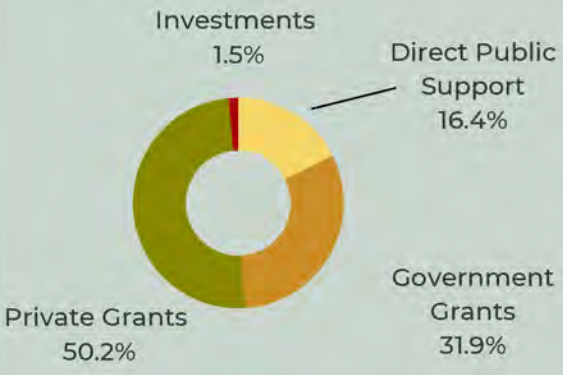
In 2024, we brought in our first garden outside city boundaries at Kenmore West Senior High. Spearheaded by experienced grower and nutrition expert Jess Altman, who brought her experience at Niagara Falls school gardens with her, the garden frames the main entrance to the school's Athletic Complex, offering both environmental beautification and a bounty for local pollinators to feast upon. In 2025, we are now beginning work with a second school in Kenmore with the Big Picture Program, located at Kenmore Junior/Senior High School.

With our increased urgency of connecting future generations to local food systems, understanding the importance of environmental stewardship, and providing activities outside of traditional classrooms, we're thrilled to have the opportunity to continue growing our work with schools and educational programs across Western New York, and grateful to all the incredible school staff who make extra time in their busy schedules to ensure their students are given every learning opportunity possible!

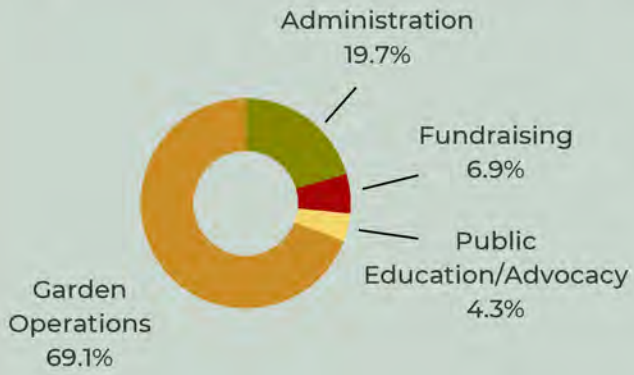
FINANCIAL SNAPSHOT

In 2024, a primary goal of GGWNY was raising the floor of support we provided to our existing garden network, particularly long-time gardens experiencing the ebbs and flows of community changes and challenges. A stable staff team and consistent support from institutions and individuals alike helped us achieve this goal, and we continue to work towards a strong financial foundation for long-term land protection.

Total Income: $ 662,509.25



Total Expenses: $ 650,205.34



COMMUNITY SUPPORT SNAPSHOT

6,000+ seedlings and 1,000+ flower bulbs supplied to community gardeners.

100+ at-large volunteers contributed more than 400 service hours.

150+ raised beds built and repaired by staff and volunteer groups.

~35,000 lbs of food grown by neighbors and shared freely in the community.

160 yards of soil and compost delivered directly to community gardens.

250 free garden consultations and public workshops provided by garden staff.

GRASSROOTS GARDENS WNY

2024 Staff

Timothy Chen
Executive Director

Justin Baumgardner
Development Director

Loc Tran
Program Manager

Sylvin Ashbrook
Land Stewardship Coordinator

Adamaah Grayse
Food Justice & Policy Fellow

Nicole Capozziello
Therapeutic Gardening Coordinator

Greg Wilder
Garden Education Coordinator

Sarah Mast Bragg
Community Garden Coordinator

Nina Coscia
Seasonal Zone Leader

Kat Bordonaro
Seasonal Zone Leader
Community Garden Coordinator

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Isabella Newman, Treasurer
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Gail Graham, *Board Member Emeritus*

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The Stenclik Family Charitable Fund
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*** Administered by the Foundation for Jewish Philanthropies*

Become a monthly supporter

Now more than ever, environmental and food organizations are confronting increasingly difficult pathways to funding and a reduced number of champions in government... even as needs continue to grow rapidly. To confront these challenges, we need your help.

By pledging a sustaining gift of $25/month, you provide reliable and stable support for Western New York's school and community gardens. Your gift makes an impact through every season of the year: from fresh veggies in the summer to the lasting neighborhood connections that endure through winter.

Visit **grassrootsgardens.org/donate** to begin your monthly gift.

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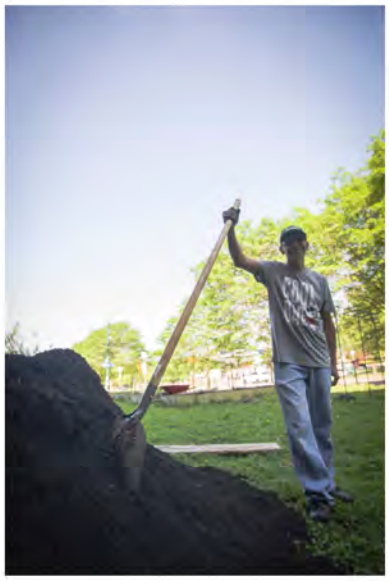
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