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Colleen Connelly: Taking the First Step towards Improving Food Accessibility

Michelle Rekowski

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Introduction:

Colleen Connelly is nineteen years old and already in her third year running the Sunnyside Community Garden in West Bloomington. She co-founded the nonprofit to provide fresh produce to the West Bloomington community as part of an entrepreneurship program at Normal Community High School. The garden's full title is the Sunnyside Community Garden (Ethnographic Interview 3-6-2018). The title is descriptive of the goals that Connelly is working towards with the garden. She wants to provide a space for the community to actively learn about the food they are growing, as a way to work towards economic and environmental sustainability. Describing the garden as a food forest is part of sustainability planning, as food forests are designed to efficiently utilize existing natural landscapes. In other words, food forests are a way to garden that works with the land rather than against it.

But why start a food forest in West Bloomington? Connelly's food forest is a response to the food desert, an area in which it is difficult to buy fresh food. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, most Bloomington residents west of Main Street are living in a food desert. This means they have low access to supermarkets where they can buy affordable fresh food. Connelly says that growing up in the area made her aware of this issue because driving down Washington Street there are few grocery stores, whereas Veterans Parkway has a multitude of supermarket options (Ethnographic Interview 3-6-2018). The scarcity of fresh produce options in West Bloomington is what led Connelly to open the Garden on the west side of

town. The location allows Connelly to serve the community living in subsidized housing near the Garden.

Although the factors contributing to food inaccessibility are complex, it is clear what Connelly focuses on. She emphasizes the importance of having local food sources instead of relying on “giant box stores” (Ethnographic Interview 3-6-2018). She often transports the produce herself to different distribution venues around town to improve accessibility as seen in Figure 1. Education is another key aspect of her work as the Garden partners with the Boys and Girls Club to teach children how to plant, nurture, and harvest the crops. This is all done with the goal of sustainability in mind. Growing locally and teaching community members how to garden ensures that the community can provide for itself in a way that is sustainable for the local environment. All of this she presents with a desire to learn from the community she serves, so that rather than her telling people what they need, Sunnyside can provide what is really important to them.



FIGURE 1

Connelly has her truck loaded with produce from the Garden to distribute at the Food Oasis run by the West Bloomington Revitalization Project. This is just one way she distributes food grown in the Garden. (Photo by Rekowski & Connelly)

Assumptions and early hypotheses:

I was not sure what to expect before meeting Colleen Connelly. I knew she was younger than myself and I knew a little about her accomplishments with Sunnyside Community Garden. I did not know if she would act like a laid back teenager or a highly professional founder of a nonprofit organization. I knew from a newspaper piece that the Garden is not a typical farmer’s market operation. It functions as a place for community service rather than business, but I had never heard of a place like the Sunnyside Community Garden. Even the research I found focused more on supermarkets and farmers markets than

places that distribute free produce like the Garden.

I was so familiar with farmers markets in white suburbia that the idea of a fresh produce stand in an urban community seemed a little out of place. And Julie Guthman wrote about why this thought process is so deeply entrenched in America. It is important to recognize that overall her work only looks at wealthy white people and poor African Americans. Guthman discusses how alternative food options like farmers markets are coded as white spaces due to the romanticized agrarian past many draw on in their marketing techniques (Guthman 2011 275). However romanticizing old farm life is not a trend many African Americans appreciate because it functions as a reminder of slavery. Although the connection is an unintentional faux pas in marketing language, it demonstrates a lack of cultural awareness which drives away minorities from the alternative food movement (Alkon 276). This literature helped me understand why farmers markets were restricted to suburbia in my mind.

I grew up in an area with abundant grocery options so I was

unaware of food deserts. Part of this is due to the demographics of my hometown because racial composition plays a heavy role in the origin of food deserts. As the number of African Americans increase in a given zip code the further away grocery stores are based, because of the perceived racial threat to the white majority (Thibodeaux 2016, 2246). This research fits with Bloomington's demographics as the number of African American residents has increased from 12,426 in 2010 to 13,674 in 2016 and they are the largest racial minority (City of Bloomington, Illinois: Demographics). This article helped me recognize the deeply rooted racial issues at the heart of food scarcity.

Food gardens like the Sunnyside Community Garden, which can help alleviate the effects of living in a food desert, were another unfamiliar but intriguing concept for me. The research that I found on the spatial organization of gardens in urban areas taught me that in many cities, the gardens are not actually placed in food deserts (Mack, Tong, & Credit, 2017, 9). It made me wonder if Connelly's garden is centered in the midst of the food desert. A

hallmark of well-placed food gardens is their ability to cater to a population that has low access to supermarkets due to reliance on time consuming public transportation (Mack et al. 2017, 2). According to the USDA Food Access Research Atlas many residents in West Bloomington lack access to personal vehicles, meaning they rely on public transit to go buy groceries.

While food gardens are one solution, placing supermarkets in food deserts is another solution which can improve quality of life for residents. Richardson's research team found that incidents of high cholesterol, arthritis, and diabetes slowed in a neighborhood with a new supermarket relative to a similar neighborhood without a supermarket (Richardson et al. 2017, 774). This research made me curious as to the potential health benefits seen in the community surrounding the Sunnyside Community Garden.

Ethnographic Methods:

I conducted this research using visual ethnographic methods as well as participant-observation to work collaboratively with Connelly so as to respectfully and accurately describe her

work as a community leader. I met with Connelly in person as often as possible in order to establish rapport as she indicated a preference for face-to-face interaction. In our first meeting we met on February 12th in the Hansen Center at ten in the morning for an hour. I explained the commitments involved with participating in the research, such as spending upwards of four hours with me over the course of the research. We read through and signed the Participant Informed Consent Form and built rapport. Conversation flowed easily and as much as I hoped to put her at ease, she made me feel comfortable preparing to conduct such personal research.

Our second meeting was at 7pm on February 23rd at the Human Rights Workshop in Evelyn Chapel. At this event we discussed our research with the academic community to get feedback on our work. This was my first opportunity to listen to Connelly talk at length about her work with the Sunnyside Community Garden. Seeing her passion for the Garden during her explanation for our small group was when I first saw her adopt the mantle of a leader. She demonstrated her expertise along with a desire to listen to

the community to learn how to serve them best.

At our third meeting we recorded our formal hour long interview in the Ames Library. This is when we got to start incorporating visual ethnographic methods. Prior to our meeting Connelly sent me a selection of pictures that she had relating to the Garden so that I could print them out for use in the interview. Figure 2 shows us viewing the pictures she sent me. I used these archival images to direct our interview, and help Connelly get comfortable in front of the camera. I hoped that having a physical copy of her photographs to hold would provide her a distraction from the camera. The camera we used to film the interview is even standing in the background.

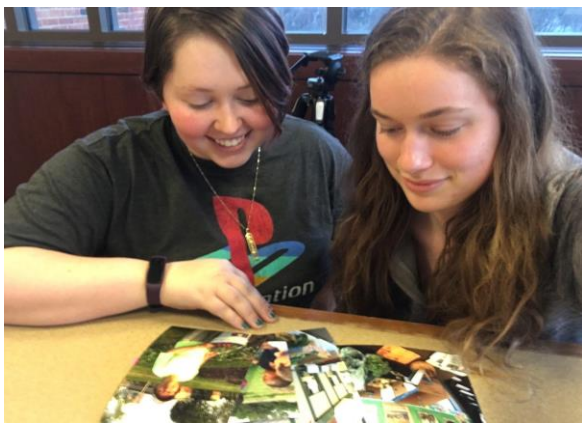


FIGURE 2

Connelly (right) and I (left) examine the pictures she sent me. This is the first photo we took together and the experience is a great example of building rapport as we laughed over finding the right camera angle to get our faces and the pictures in the shot. (Photo by Rekowski & Connelly)

The images Connelly chose showed her focus on promoting the Garden more than herself as she is only in one of the six pictures we discussed. The visual recording of this interview is another component of employing visual ethnographic methods as it will eventually be incorporated into a film.

Our fourth and fifth meetings were to take and edit pictures in a way that communicates Connelly's experience running the Sunnyside Community Garden. I was nervous about creating these images as she was not in the majority of the pictures she had previously shown me. Thankfully Connelly was not only willing to participate in my amateur photo shoot, but she gave me fantastic photo ideas such as in Figure 1 wherein she suggested standing in front of her truck bed so I could later edit in the vegetables. The desert picture which is superimposed over the Google Maps image in Figure 4 is another one of Connelly's ideas acting as a visual metaphor for the food desert. Most of the pictures we took outside of the Hansen Center, but Figures 5 and 8 feature pictures taken at her home. We also met in the Ames Library for our

editing session. Our collaborative effort in putting together these images is the cornerstone of responsible ethnographic research as Connelly has participated in her representation at every stage of the research.

Presentation of Data:

Connelly's main goals with the Sunnyside Community Garden are to support local food sources, educate the community, and promote sustainable practices. These goals are a result of her family's substantial role in shaping her paths and passions. Her mother Jan, an avid gardener, has often touted the benefits of growing and eating your own food. Her father Robert has devoted his life to elementary education and is a compassionate person. Figure 3 shows how they have literally provided her with the tools she needed to found the Sunnyside Community Garden. The metaphor of handing Connelly the gardening gloves and shovel is also symbolic of the knowledge and support they continue to provide her with as she continues to run the Garden.

Part of Connelly's focus on using local food sources stems from her mother's attitude about gardening, but it



FIGURE 3

Left to right: Robert Connelly, Colleen Connelly, Jan Turner (Photo by Rekowski & Connelly)

"I never foresaw my future as a gardener or an educator, in fact I was pretty adamant about being neither, yet here I am!"
~Colleen Connelly 2-23-2018

is also due to her frustrations with corporate food machines (Human Rights Workshop 2-23-2018). Her main reasoning is that oversized supermarkets have contributed to the creation of urban food deserts by elbowing out small grocers which are necessary given the limited space in the city (Ethnographic Interview 3-6-2018). Food scarcity is a manufactured problem caused by huge corporations such as Cargill. "The consolidation of such large corporations in the food industry is one of the leading causes of food scarcity as well as environmental

degradation” (Human Rights Workshop 2-23-2018). Connelly sees working to directly combat food insecurity as the Garden’s short term goal. Taking on systemic issues that cause food insecurity is one of her long term goals.

Connelly notes Cargill in particular because of its proximity to the Garden. When she first mentioned the company she described it as casting a shadow on the Garden (Human Rights Workshop 2-23-2018). That metaphorical language led us to imagine Figure 4.

Using local food sources is a great way for the community to create a sustainable food source for itself. As we show in Figure 5 (on page 8), Connelly’s garden is truly a food forest in the midst

of the West Bloomington food desert. There is a complete absence of full-service grocery stores. She wants to create relationships within the community so that going to the Garden becomes as intuitive as going to a grocery store (Ethnographic Interview 3-6-2018).

Education comes into play through in the programming offered at the Sunnyside Community Garden. Connelly has partnered with the Boys and Girls Club just two blocks away to have the children come by and get hands-on learning experience in the Garden (Human Rights Workshop). One activity the kids participated in was learning about how worms are essential to the compost process because of their nutrient rich fecal matter (Ethnographic



FIGURE 4

Despite the irony of the Garden’s proximity to the agriculture conglomerate Cargill, Connelly holds gardening tools showing her determination to take on the systematic issues of food scarcity. (Photo by Rekowski & Connelly)

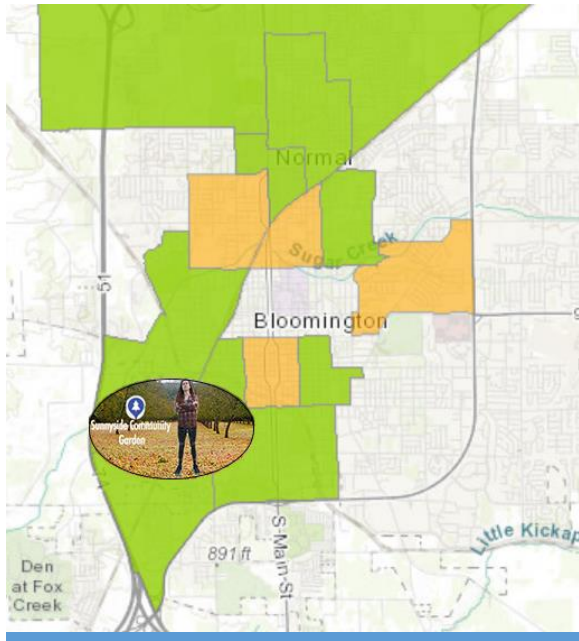


FIGURE 5

The green and orange highlighted areas on this map of Bloomington-Normal are considered food deserts by the United States Department of Agriculture. The Garden acts as a literal food oasis. The few stores that do sell food do not sell fresh produce, and all are too small to register as a supermarket according to the USDA (Ver Ploeg, Breneman, & Rhone 2017). (Photo by Rekowski & Connelly)

dirt. Some people also lack the cooking skills needed to prepare fresh produce because they lack regular access. Connelly has a simple, but powerful solution to this combination of issues. Rather than forcing the community to accept strange looking vegetation, she decided to clean and package some of the Garden's produce with help from the Boys and Girls Club children. Figures 6 and 7 below depict this challenge and solution respectively. In Connelly's thought bubble in Figure 7 the plastic bags contain fresh basil and a recipe for pesto (Ethnographic Interview 3-6-2018). By providing the recipe inside the bag of basil, people are more likely to take a package home.

Interview 3-6-2018). She hopes to teach them about pollinators in the future.

In addition to educating the youth she understands the importance making the food approachable for people who have only ever eaten store-bought produce. The food for sale at the store tends to look uniform. Every Granny Smith Apple looks roughly the same and it is rare to see vegetables covered in



FIGURE 6

Connelly raises up a potato grown in the Garden, but its strange shape may not be as well received as the oval-shaped one from a grocery store. She hopes to combat the expectation of produce uniformity. (Photo by Rekowski & Connelly)



FIGURE 7

Connelly washes a fresh beet in her kitchen sink, while thinking about the vegetables that will need to be cleaned and packaged for people to take home and enjoy. (Photo by Rekowski & Connelly)

Data Analysis:

Colleen Connelly surprised me in many ways. I went into this research assuming that she would either be an average teenager or a complete professional. It turns out she can be both. She can switch from colloquial language to speaking as a leader of a nonprofit organization in the blink of an eye. She is what a good leader should be: willing to listen and learn. When asked about adversaries she looked at herself saying that an “unseen adversary is ego, because you want to make the plans whereas you need to take into account the community’s needs” (Ethnographic Interview 3-6-2018). Connelly’s solution is to keep learning and admitting she does not

know everything because the issues she deals with are multifaceted (Ethnographic Interview 3-6-2018). The amount of humility and mindfulness evident in such an admission is what makes her a successful leader. She is well aware of the role that racism plays in food scarcity and the systematic inequalities that effect food availability, which makes her a strong ally and voice in the West Bloomington community. Based on the findings from Elizabeth Mack's (2017) research team, the Garden is optimally placed to serve the low income area it is in. Finally, Colleen Connelly is a great role model for future leaders because of her hopefulness and resourcefulness shown in Figure 8. Connelly is watering a kohlrabi plant growing out of a crack in the sidewalk. This picture shows that with a little creativity and a nurturing hand, life can grow in a conventional city landscape.

Conclusions:

Colleen Connelly is laying the groundwork to improve access to fresh food in West Bloomington for generations to come. She serves the community as much as she leads the effort in the Sunnyside Community



FIGURE 8

“One of my main inspirations when I was first starting the Garden are those in urban agriculture, who use creative tactics to grow food within a densely populated concrete jungle”
~Colleen Connelly 2-23-2018
(Photo by Rekowski & Connelly)

Garden. Finding times to meet was the most difficult part of conducting this research as she is busy preparing for a new planting season. Between her

schedule and the time constraint of the short spring semester, having more time to complete the study would influence the findings. If I had more time I also could have helped in the Garden, which would have allowed me to see her in action. An interesting question that my research does not answer is how the Garden affects the health of the community near the Garden. I would like to know if the Garden has a similar effect as the implementation of a full service supermarket like in Richardson's

research (2017). Looking at the health benefits is an important topic for future research.

Getting to know and work with Colleen Connelly has been a privilege. I have learned more about the Bloomington-Normal community in two months working with her, than I have in almost three years living here. Issues surrounding racism and corporate greed can be treacherous, but Connelly makes these controversial topics as approachable as her fresh produce.

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