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## From Farm to Food Pantry: Prochotsky '16 Launches Pop-Up Produce Stands

Sept. 24, 2014

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— Just like seedlings, an idea to get more fresh food onto the dinner plates of local residents has matured and yielded a bountiful harvest.

Illinois Wesleyan University student Jenny Prochotsky '16 (Libertyville, Ill.) has organized a gleaning project to distribute free fresh produce at pop-up produce stands in west Bloomington. So far more than 3,000 pounds of unsold produce has been collected from the Downtown Bloomington Association Farmers Market and distributed through the generosity of farmers and the efforts of dozens of volunteers.

Prochotsky is the most recent of several Illinois Wesleyan students studying food justice issues and organizing initiatives to address those issues in the community. Through Illinois Wesleyan's **Action Research Center** and the Community Partnership Program (CPP), Prochotsky worked at State Farm and interned two days per week this summer at the **West Bloomington Revitalization Project** (WBRP).



Jenny Prochotsky '16

Previous CPP interns had conducted research on west Bloomington's food desert, generally considered to be any geographic area where affordable and nutritious food is difficult to obtain, particularly for those without access to a car.

"After studying food justice issues at Illinois Wesleyan, I was interested in putting a real-life framework to the topic by speaking to people who live in the experience," said Prochotsky. So one Thursday afternoon in June, Prochotsky wandered the streets of west Bloomington, scanning the offerings in stores and talking to people at bus stops about how often they went shopping for groceries, where they went, and the obstacles they faced in getting what they wanted.

"Much of the research I collected wasn't surprising," Prochotsky said. "If you can only get to Wal-Mart every two weeks, you're not going to buy the fresh spinach that goes bad in a few days. You're going to buy the shelf-stable food."

As a **biology** major planning to become a physician, Prochotsky was disturbed that affordable fresh food wasn't readily available to west-side residents. National research links diet-related health problems in populations living in food deserts.

Prochotsky decided making fresh food available to local residents would yield dual results. Residents would get fresh food, and Prochotsky would continue to gather first-hand information. Guided by Action Research Center Program Coordinator Deborah Halperin, Prochotsky set up the first pop-up stand with produce from the IWU Peace Garden within 24 hours of deciding to try the idea.



Neighborhood residents gain access to fresh produce.

Prochotsky then approached the coordinator of the Downtown

Bloomington Association Farmers Market. Volunteers had gleaned at the market in previous years, so farmers were familiar with the idea of gathering the unsold produce and were happy to participate.

Prochotsky said she quickly discovered how much time and energy gleaning requires, and said that without the help of many volunteers, the project would have died on the vine. Prochotsky and Halperin created an online sign-up mechanism, which passed to, among others, faculty members at Illinois State University, the owners of Green Top

Grocery, Illinois Wesleyan alumni and the CSA of PrairieErth Farm in Atlanta, Ill. The volunteer network now both efficiently gleans and distributes the food.

The location of the weekly pop-up stands is announced on Facebook in the Farm to Food Pantry group. Locations have ranged from churches and community gardens to parks and even neighborhood garage sales. At several locations, neighbors have dropped off their extra produce. So far more than 700 people have received fresh food.

Previous initiatives and research conducted by Illinois Wesleyan interns before her allowed Prochotsky to “hit the ground running” when her CPP internship began this summer.

Alex Kim '13 built a Veggie Bike in 2012 to transport vegetables from the IWU Peace Garden; Farm to Food Pantry volunteers use it regularly. Volunteers with the IWU Peace Garden, founded in 2012, have supplied produce and helped with the project. Daniel Burke '09 worked to have Electronic Benefits Transfers accepted at the Downtown Bloomington Farmers Market.

Unlike fields lying fallow under winter's snow, the project will stay active past harvest. Prochotsky is weeding through the information she continues to gather as part of the research project, and she and Halperin are identifying grants or other opportunities for funding to expand the project.

“I’ve learned so much about connecting, whether that’s by listening to people and their needs or figuring out how to connect to people with skills I don’t have,” said Prochotsky. “At ARC we’re taught that community development is never about what *you* want to do and forcing your ideas on others, but more about listening to the needs of the community and letting the community guide you to a way to address those needs.”



Admissions Counselor and 2013 alum Bobby Castillo delivers produce with the Veggie Bike.