



Spring 5-18-2016

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Recommended Citation

University Communications, "Shaffer '16 Wins Youth Engaged in Philanthropy Grant" (2016). *News and Events*. 2789.
<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news/2789>

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Shaffer '16 Wins Youth Engaged in Philanthropy Grant

May 18, 2016

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— For Illinois Wesleyan University student Rachel Shaffer '16, securing a grant to teach grade schoolers about local food consumption was the easy part. Actually growing the crop turned out to be much more difficult.

Shaffer received a Youth Engaged in Philanthropy (YEP) grant from the Illinois Prairie Community Foundation. The grant supported supplies for her initiative to help third and fifth graders connect hands-on activities with classroom learning about healthy food, sustainability and environmental stewardship.

Earlier this year Shaffer helped Glenn Elementary students plant basil in cowpots that were kept inside the hoop house at the [IWU Peace Garden](#). The students also took individual seeds for sowing in their classrooms, and Shaffer planted a third variety of basil plants in small plastic pots for growing inside a building on campus. Shaffer also taught the students about local eating, how local consumption benefits the economy and the environment, and ways they could implement sustainable practices at home.

"We were going to determine how different elements such as location, types of basil, type of pot and other factors impacted growth, but we ran into some problems with an overabundance of rabbits," said Shaffer, a former manager of the IWU Peace Garden. "And the seeds in the classroom didn't grow at all."



Glenn Elementary fifth graders examine the basil seeds they planted in cowpots, which are biodegradable.



Rachel Shaffer '16 talks with Glenn Elementary fifth graders in the IWU Peace Garden. She won a YEP grant to teach lessons about local food consumption.

In spite of the challenges, each student had a basil seedling at the end of the school year, and for many youngsters, the most important lessons were the challenges of producing crops. "Growing your own food is hard," one of the third graders told Shaffer. "I don't know how there is enough food to eat."

Shaffer said she assured her student she does not grow all of her own food, but as a testament to a good educator's ability to innovate, she harvested basil from plants she grows in her apartment year-round so that she could make homemade pesto for each student to sample.

"Even if the project didn't go exactly as I had intended, watching the kids learn about local eating and the importance of growing your own food has been wonderful," she said. "They've recognized it's a lot of work getting food to the grocery store."

[Experiential learning](#) is a hallmark of an Illinois Wesleyan education, whether the experience is research or other creative activity under the guidance of a faculty mentor, community service, study abroad or internship programs. Shaffer, a [political science](#) and [International Studies](#)

double major from Puyallup, Wash., has engaged in several such experiences. Shaffer, who will complete her coursework in December, studied abroad in Greece. She is president of the Illinois Wesleyan Colleges Against Cancer chapter, a Titan Orientation Leader, campus tour guide and member of Sigma Kappa sorority and Alpha Phi Omega service fraternity. She also received the [Weir Fellowship](#) to create an outdoor classroom and interfaith space and was selected to participate in the Titan Leadership Program.

