

Growing up green: Program teaches boys about agriculture and more

BY ROXIE HAMMILL - SPECIAL TO THE STAR

08/26/2014 6:08 PM | Updated: 08/26/2014 10:42 PM



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They greet a visitor with a firm handshake, a steady smile and an offer to tour the facilities. See the goats? They'll tell you their names (Beyoncé and Solange) and their plans to eventually breed them for goats milk.

Or how about those chickens? Someone will helpfully volunteer that the coops house 25 Rhode Island Reds that produce about 105 eggs a month.

Or maybe you'd like to see the rows of tomatoes and kale. Perhaps you'd like to spend \$4 or \$5 on a bottle of agave ketchup or avocado hot sauce, made partly with vegetables grown on the farm.

The boys of Boys Grow are eager to help, inform, educate and sell. Dressed in dark green polos with the nonprofit's insignia, they roam the grounds of their hilltop farm near Grandview on a recent evening, chatting with visitors at an end-of-the-season barbecue/open house. By evening's end, they will have told their benefactors the lessons they've learned:

How to grow food. How to develop a product line featuring that food. How to demonstrate and market it to stores and retail customers.

That these are middle school and early high school city kids whose previous gardening experience was, at most, mowing lawns, is beside the point. What matters is the now. Now they know how to keep a schedule, grow food, tend livestock. Now they know how to cook kale.

And perhaps most terrifying for any 14- to 16-year-old, now they know how

to look an adult in the eye and pitch a business deal.

“You learn how to communicate with other people. How you communicate is a big part of this job,” said Dagan Berkley, 16, of Kansas City. Berkley admits to being shy a couple of years ago.

“He was that tall guy standing at the back of the room,” remembered his friend, Bryan Reyes, 15, of Kansas City, Kan.

Now, though, Berkley says he enjoys the selling as much as the farm work. “You’re not only showing you’re able to farm but able to speak,” he said.

Boys Grow celebrates its fourth year this year with a giant leap forward in what it can offer. After three nomadic years with garden plots that had no outbuildings or irrigation systems, the program now has its own 10-acre farm in southern Kansas City complete with a pond, a 1938 farmhouse and five other buildings.

All that space will at last enable Boys Grow to expand its culinary and product development programs, said founder John Gordon Jr.

The seeds of the program were sown in the early 2000s, when Gordon began attending a wilderness retreat in New Mexico called Fathers Sons & Brothers. The retreat focused on improving communication, self-esteem and relationships among males.

After four years, a workshop leader offered him a job at a social service agency in Chico, Calif., working with youths. There, Gordon observed how a move to the country transformed the life of one of his clients. He brought that lesson back to Kansas City in 2008.

Gordon started Boys Grow in 2010 with one class of 12 boys. For three seasons, the farming was done on borrowed land in Kansas City, Kan.

Those years were tough, Gordon said. With no access to buildings, electricity or irrigation, everything had to be set up and taken down daily. Water and food for the boys was hauled in.

“It was like having a picnic with 30 people every day,” said Gordon.

But the program grew anyway. Soon two classes a year were learning to toil in the sun and, more importantly, talk about their program to chefs and potential partners.

The property Boys Grow owns today came about as a result of those talks. Gordon, recognizing that the program couldn’t go on forever on temporary and ever-changing donated land, began a fundraising campaign in 2012 and started looking for some acreage close to town at a price the nonprofit could afford.

It was slow going at first. After a crowdsourcing campaign and a fundraiser at Lidia’s Restaurant, Boys Grow had about \$75,000 — not nearly enough to buy the kind of real estate Gordon was looking for.

He kept looking. “People were telling us, ‘You are too picky,’” Gordon said.

Then a speaking opportunity came up at the Kauffman Foundation's 1 Million Cups entrepreneurship forum.

"We don't ever turn down a speaking opportunity," said Gordon.

The presentation caught the ear of officials from Cargill Cares, the community outreach arm of agribusiness giant Cargill. The Boys Grow program happened to hit a sweet spot for that group, whose focus is health, nutrition and the environment.

After more talks and some due diligence, Cargill decided to help the group in a big way. Result: a check for \$225,000 so the nonprofit could buy the property it stands on today.

It was a large sum, especially for such a new organization, but "everybody was impressed enough with Boys Grow and the direction they're headed that we are definitely happy to be part of it," said Eric Keller of Cargill Cares.

Pete Elsham, also of Cargill Cares, agreed: "One big connection for us is that they're taking kids who've grown up in the city and connecting them to agriculture."

Farm manager Joshua Anderson gives a quick pep talk to the boys before the barbecue begins. Soon their benefactors from Cargill will be coming to take a look around, and he does a little pop quiz to prepare them for questions.

How are the weeds kept out?

The boys know this one. They get up close and personal with the weeds using their hoes.

The question of how to deal with bugs is a little tougher. Keeping out the weeds, which provide habitat for bugs, is one answer. Next year, the farm may use an organic pesticide derived from nicotiana, a relative of tobacco plants.

But most importantly, "we don't spray," Anderson reminds them.

Boys Grow uses organic methods to grow its crops — an important point for marketing to restaurants and at farmers markets. Anderson, who developed his farming chops in the Peace Corps, says a program like this one spreads good in many directions.

Not only do city boys learn about healthful eating and hard work, he said, but they may even go home and start their own gardens. "They are going out and diffusing this knowledge."

Such was the case with John Bush, a sophomore this year at East High School.

After he graduated from the program a couple years ago, he came back to try his own garden in the backyard, said his mother, Kathryn Bush of

Kansas City. Although the weeds got the better of that effort, she said her son still looks back fondly on his days at the farm.

“John said he kind of worked his butt off because he loved the work he did,” she said. “He’s just wishing he could go back.”

Working one’s butt off is definitely part of the lesson plan at Boys Grow. Reyes gets a wistful smile when asked about what he did with his summers before Boys Grow.

“I would be in my air-conditioned home, watching TV, eating, playing video games ...” he said.

“It was pretty boring.”

Boys Grow works with boys 14 to 16 years old who submit an application and have successful interviews, Gordon said. The nonprofit works with four schools and a couple community centers to get the word out.

The organization hires two “classes” of 12 kids to come out and work three days a week during the summer. They get a stipend of \$25 for the three hours of work they do each day, although a typical day is six hours long because of lunch, breaks and commuting time. It’s a two-year commitment.

But all those hours feeding chickens and hoeing, making it to the bus on time with a white bucket full of gear — and in uniform — are only part of the story.

The boys get two years and about 100 hours of training in direct sales, making presentations to chefs and store owners. They also demonstrate and give samples of their products to store customers. And the ones who are interested in restaurants get to train with local chefs, including on-site chef Max Watson, serving lunch for everyone on Mondays and developing products.

Each year, the boys launch a new product. They’ve done barbecue sauce and agave ketchup. This year’s product is avocado hot sauce.

Along the way, the group has developed quite a few friends in Kansas City. A partnership with Giving Grove yielded 50 new apple, peach, pear and cherry trees. They’ve also been featured at events by Cultivate Kansas City. Both those groups support urban agriculture.

“One of the things that is really good is that they’ve taken agriculture seriously,” said Katherine Kelly, executive director of Cultivate Kansas City. “This is not like a therapy program. They are working with agriculture as a business. Those kids are into it.”

Howard Hanna, chef and owner of the Rieger Hotel Grill and Exchange restaurant in Kansas City, was especially impressed as he observed Gordon working with the boys. In particular, he remembers them looking him in the eye as they shook hands.

“It wasn’t just about agriculture and growing vegetables,” he said. “It was about life skills.”

The restaurant, which buys produce from Boys Grow, hosted a dinner for the graduating class one year.

The boys arrived in a limousine, dressed up and, obviously to Hanna, a little out of their comfort zone. Even so, Gordon talked them through which forks to use, he said.

“Even though it was the end of the year and they were graduating, he was still teaching.”

Melanie Hicks of Raytown said the experience transformed her son, Tyson. Hicks was working in a bank when she first heard of Boys Grow.

“I saw a kid come in and get a check cashed, and he seemed really young to be having a job,” she said. But he told her all about the program, which she thought would be perfect for Tyson.

“He was shy and reserved, and never really wanted to get out and try new things” she said.

So rather than trying another year of summer camps or school, she got Tyson to an interview, and he was accepted.

He didn’t take to it at first, she said. But then something changed.

“I don’t know what they did. John seemed to take him under his wing. The next thing I know, they were telling me he was a top seller,” she said.

Tyson graduated from Boys Grow last year, but Hicks said he’s still interested in sales. After high school, she said, he wants to own his own business.

Ditto for Reyes, who was on the Boys Grow culinary team and has an interest in restaurants.

“I like to be my own boss. I like to take orders from myself,” he said. “If anybody is going to get something done, it’s going to be me.”

Berkley also recognizes the hard work had a purpose.

“I’m thankful for you showing an interest in us as young men,” he said as the closing speaker at the barbecue. “As my career, I want to be an architect. I hope to be able to build a building for Boys Grow one day.”

It’s been hard work, but it comes with a lot of satisfaction, said Berkley, who attends Hogan Preparatory Academy. “By the time you’re done, you look out and everything’s all green. It’s just good to know you did that.”

GETTING INVOLVED

Boys are accepted for the Boys Grow program through an application and personal interview process. Recruiting generally starts in February of each year, said founder John Gordon Jr.

Potential applicants should be boys in about eighth grade. Families can send an email to staff@boysgrow.com for information about how to apply.

Boys Grow recruits at four local schools and two community centers, but the program isn't limited to boys who apply through them.

The four schools are Alta Vista Middle School, Lee A. Tolbert Community Academy and Ewing Marion Kauffman School in Kansas City and West Middle School in Kansas City, Kan.

The community centers are Tony Aguirre Community Center and Big Brothers Big Sisters of Greater Kansas City.

Donations can be made through www.boysgrow.com (<http://www.boysgrow.com>).