

# UP FRONT



## NEIGHBORHOOD STORIES

By Bette McDevitt

### Ballfield Farm

Many neighborhoods in our area have community gardens, where people tend a small plot. Few communities have a collective farm, and only one has a farm that flourishes on a former ballfield. That would be Brighton Heights, where Ballfield Farm sits above Uniondale Cemetery on the five-acre site of the former Sanguini Field. It is quite a transformation. “We worked our butts off,” says Carole Gonzalez, a member of the collective leadership team, referring not only to the daily labor but the collaborative effort to make their vision real.

Everyone works and everyone harvests the jointly planted vegetables and flowers. The farm takes up 1-1/2 acres; in the remaining area, the group created a picnic site and a trail beside a brook, and is growing ramps (a



**Mark Williams, along with his wife, helped create the Ballfield Farm.**

Photo by Bette McDevitt.

**Erika Beras and Andy Moore kneel next to several bushels of sweet potatoes.**

Photo by Jen Meyercheck.



perennial wild onion) and mushrooms. “It’s the best thing I’ve found, since moving to Pittsburgh two years ago,” says Jill Yeomans, who bikes over from Troy Hill, to do the daily watering on certain days.

When I visited one perfect summer Saturday, Charles Chapman was listing chores on a white board, and assigning tasks to workers: “If you like the sun, join us weeding the tomato plants, or if you like the shade, you can plant peas in the high tunnel.” The high tunnel is a rounded long plastic greenhouse that allows them to plant early in the year and offers shade during the hot summer.

Two men were making tomato cages from a roll of wire. Their goal was 30 cages. “We figure they cost about \$3 each this way, versus \$13 if we buy them,” says Andy Moore. Andy has planted some pawpaw plants in the garden. He has a fondness for the native plant, which I’m told tastes like custard, and he has written a book about it to be published next year. Several others are crouched in the garden rows, weeding tomatoes and squash by hand. It’s an organic garden, so hand combat is the method of choice for getting rid of weeds. Their

children are nearby, playing in a sandbox or tending the beans they have planted.

For Mark Williams, Ballfield Farm is the realization of something only hoped for.

In 2008, he walked past the abandoned ballfield every day on his way to work at the Pittsburgh Project, nearby on North Charles Street, and envisioned a garden. “I thought ‘Wouldn’t it be crazy if we could get people to all work together well enough to just do it all together?’” And that is exactly what happened.

Mark attended a Faith and Farming Conference, and met a pastor from Anathoth Community Farm and Garden who transformed an empty field into an urban farm in a still-mostly segregated town in North Carolina. Anathoth is a biblical term referring to reconciliation. “After I came home, I called him and asked him ‘How did you do it? What works? What doesn’t work?’ Mark gave me all the details:

We partnered with Heifer International, the City of Pittsburgh, Mildred’s Daughters, Grow Pittsburgh, and Garden Dreams from Wilkinsburg, and a whole bunch of people to make it happen. My wife, Courtney, is a farmer;

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Learn more about the Ballfield Farm and how to volunteer.



she is the brains of the operation. We got this land and we got enough money to build the fence, the city paid to install it, and we paid for the materials and got a grant to build the high tunnel. The Pittsburgh Project got a grant to employ and train young people aged 18–25 with marketable construction skills. It was way over my head, I don't know how to build anything. They laid the foundation and several church groups put up the tunnel.

During the first year, the farm was part of the Pittsburgh Project, but now it's a stand-alone project, run by volunteers. Gavin Deming, who happens to work for the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy and is one of the lead volunteers, says, "The great thing about this being a baseball field is that the soil, not developed or used for industrial purposes, was not contaminated with lead or other toxins." The Conservancy has helped to improve the soil, bringing excess refuse from city gardens, and providing compost with it." The compost piles are huge, some 10 feet high, before they begin to decompose.

"When people come by," says Gavin, "they tell us 'I remember when my kids played here, or I played here.' Before Mark began the project, volunteers went to every house, asking if people were okay with this happening, and would they like to be involved. And the answer was a resounding yes, we'd love that."

Ballfield Farm is open to everyone, and members come from throughout the county. Dues are \$15 per person, or \$30 for a family. Members are asked to work 1-1/2 hours for an individual membership and 3 hours for a family. They often have social events such as a meal together. On that perfect summer day, one member was having a pool party in the afternoon. The members have done more than plant a garden; they have formed a community. I came home with fresh beets and a sense of well-being. 🌻

**Bette McDevitt** is a longtime contributor to *Western Pennsylvania History*.



**Above:**  
Charles Chapman  
working the farm.

Photos this page by Bette McDevitt.

**Right:**  
Liz Chapman at work.

**Below:**  
Joanna Deuing sits with some  
children at Ballfield Farm.

