

Reviving Neglected Neighborhoods with Bountiful Crops and Green Space

Urban farm MUFI, located in Detroit's North End, connects residents with agriculture and each other

Founded in 2011, nonprofit organization MUFI (Michigan Urban Farming Initiative) focuses on community engagement, education, sustainability, and food security. In growing fresh produce—fully powered by volunteers—and offering it to underserved communities free of charge, they provide a healthy, local, and affordable alternative to the ubiquity of industrial food.

MUFI was co-founded by Tyson Gersh, whose interest in agriculture grew while he was a psychology student at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. He first became familiar with Detroit's North End community in his early twenties while working as a research assistant for the Urban Community Oral Health Project. During that time, Gersh saw first-hand the devastating consequences of food insecurity and how inequalities within the food system are linked to structural disparities and socioeconomic status. Together with his university friend Darin McLeskey (who is no longer involved), he founded MUFI with the aim of addressing the issues he had witnessed.

Detroit is a complex place. Once the prosperous cradle of the automobile

industry in the U.S.—its nickname is still Motor City—in 2013 it became the largest municipality in the history of the United States to file for bankruptcy, and has lost 20 percent of its population in the last decade alone. Neglected neighborhoods are not a rare sight: almost 20,000 abandoned houses have been knocked down since 2014, and inequality is part of everyday life, with more than a third of the population living below the poverty line. Initiatives to improve the neighborhoods walk a tight line between enhancing and gentrifying—an issue that is complicated, and that urban farming projects (including but not limited to MUFI) must navigate consciously and honestly in order to truly succeed in benefiting the community.

One of MUFI's top priorities is to address that rampant inequality. "Our mission is technically to engage people in urban agriculture, but effectively our work accomplishes so much more," says Gersh, the farm's executive director. "I think the value that our organization brings to the community has a lot of different parts to it: food security, of course, and also having a big volunteer force in the neighborhood to help existing residents with property maintenance and community beautification. We also provide an outdoor space to socialize in, where residents can be effectively grocery

