

# Seattle Community Court

## Farms & Courts– a great partnership



Written by Kyong Soh,  
Marra Farm Coordinator

Marra Farm, one of our most recent community partners, is a common favorite among Community Court participants. It is a unique four acre urban farm engaged in sustainable agriculture and education, and a community garden that provides fresh produce to food banks and other local residents in the South Park area, a Seattle community with high poverty rates, pollution and food insecurity.

A full season has gone by and although the growing beds are covered in snow and resting, our relationship with Seattle’s Community Court continues to grow. It was at Georgetown’s St. Vincent De-Paul’s busy food bank distribution day that I met a couple of Community Court AmeriCorps, Emily and Joey, who were supervising the work of community court mandated folks, doing their service hours. They worked side by side with these folks, and I never differentiated them from the folks required to complete hours until later. I often think about the subtle ways people build the kind of trust and community that is deeply impactful and obviously memorable. Joey and Emily had a way with the people they worked with, and after meeting Tricia Lapitan, their supervisor, I began to see their united front of working tactfully, powerfully and in a transformative way.

Solid Ground runs an Emergency Food System Giving Garden at Marra Farm, and like Community Court, also has a revolving door of participants. I felt kinship in how intentional we aim to be to make the biggest impact on the folks we serve. Thousands of volunteers in a season, from families, little kiddos, all the way to university service learning students, corporate teams, school groups, seniors, neighbors, folks of all walks of life come to chip away at a beast we can’t often put our finger on. Inequity plays out in many insidious ways, especially in our food system and Solid Ground aims to end poverty by building community. It was a brilliant idea to collaborate and connect the two programs and when Tricia came to Marra Farm to tour and talk about the objectives of the program and to assess if this was indeed a good fit for the participants, we were pleased when we reunited at a volunteer appreciation potluck a few months later, in open arms with our children, amongst staff and volunteers to celebrate the community and opportunity we had built.

Participants of community court usually start out with little eye contact, seemingly little interest, quiet and hardened from the court process and now having to do time in the community. At Marra Farm, we invite our guests by orienting them to the landscape and history of the farm, the purpose and mission of our efforts and we easily move into the discussion of inequities, which seems to hit home for a lot of folks, especially in the south end of the city where there is a disproportionate number of communities experiencing poverty.



not a Community Court participant

## Farms & Courts, continued...

When I begin talking about hardships, inequitable life experiences, the purpose of this organic produce grown in community for people and families in need, I see a transformation. I start to see some eyes; I start to see people stand up straighter, taller. Folks start to connect the work we do as a direct way of addressing the systems that perpetuate the hard life experiences of folks that often come through community court.



During breaks and at the end of the work day, smiles are wide and conversations are flowing. People tell me the names of their children and stories about their lives. Many folks have given such great feedback about how great it was to work so hard together for a common good. From mulching, weeding, trenching, digging,

composting, harvesting, washing, seeding, yes more weeding, painting, building, and all the other odds and ends jobs that come with farm work, the participants of Community Court have been incredibly instrumental in pulling in and delivering the twenty two thousand pounds of fresh organic locally grown produce to our south end families and folks in need.



For more on Marra Farm, please visit [solidground.org](http://solidground.org).

## Executive Committee Perspectives, *from the Defense*

In our practice, the individuals whom we come into contact with on a daily basis come to us as they are: from different socio-economical, educational, racial and cultural backgrounds. Now, couple that with homelessness along with mental health issues, or alcohol/substance abuse and what you have oftentimes, is an individual who probably has re-cycled through the criminal justice system. However, if these same individuals have been involved in low level crimes and labeled as chronic offenders by the prosecution, they may have the good fortune to be referred to Seattle Municipal Community Court (SMCC).

Although various changes have occurred within SMCC during the approximately ten years this Court has operated; the goal of SMCC remains the same: to make this city more livable and safer for all its residents; to offer this population an opportunity to avoid incarceration; and to save the taxpayers the expense of emergency room visits and jail costs due to the low level chronic offenders ongoing underlying issues. Community Court was established to address these issues and to provide options to those individuals who wanted to change their lives for the better but didn't have the basic skills or the resources to do so. Working collaboratively: the judge, the prosecution, the defense and probation came together to create Community Court.

The first Community Court allowed the potential participant to make the conscience decision to give back to the community in which they harmed by performing community service and in return, they avoided jail time. Although the successful participant would avoid jail time, the charge would remain on his/her criminal record. After several years of tweaking the original CC model, changes were implemented to allow the participant to enter CC without entering a guilty plea but instead they were offered a dispositional continuance. This gave the participant the opportunity to have their case dismissed if they successfully completed the conditions outlined by the court. These conditions may have included in part community service, completing a self-awareness/life skill class, and making social contacts identified by probation. The latter component of the participant making social contacts was the biggest change to CC. The rationale behind integrating this component within the CC model was to give the participants a foundational base to hopefully build on to prevent them from engaging in ongoing criminal behavior. These contacts included: seeking DSHS benefits, housing, employment, and referrals to mental health and/or alcohol/drug treatment. The advantage of this model was that the jurisdiction period along with probation would last only 14 days.

Although these changes were made, this model did not substantially improve the graduation rate of participants. So, once again, SMCC team and stakeholders did not give up on the program but instead had a review done of the program to see why it wasn't more successful.

In September 2013, after receiving a written report from the Center for Court Innovation and working for six months on implementing new changes based on the review, the 2.0 Community Court was rolled out.



**Karen Murray, Supervising Attorney  
Associated Counsel for the Accused**

This program was designed to make the participants more invested in changing their lives. Upfront they were informed by their attorney that the court could impose from 14 days to 180 days of jurisdiction and increase jail time from 5 days to 90 days if they started the program and did not complete the conditions as outlined by the court. The potential CC participants were not deterred. In fact, they welcomed it, because most had come to the realization that something must be better than just existing and some were simply sick and tired of waking up to the same mundane routine day after day. Whatever the impetus they were still willing to enter Community Court.

So, the million dollar question is, "How's the new improve 2.0 Community Court working?"

Well, here is what we know for sure. Each participant that enters this program comes with some of the above issues that have been commented on. However, how the CC team deals with those issues can only be addressed by knowing the participants 'real' story and realizing that no one plan is a one size fits all. And defining success for 2.0 Community Court is a difficult proposition but possible nonetheless. In fact, the question asked by Presiding Judge, Karen Donohue to the graduating participant may reveal the answer. Her question to each graduating participant is, "What did you think about Community Court?"

Here are a few of those responses:

*"Community Court was a blessing in disguise. Helps to better one self and to be congratulated on top of it for doing it, is really special. I want to say thank you because of this program I am going on to Cosmetology School."*

*"I really enjoyed it and was amazed to find out that this program is not available in all jurisdictions; I am very grateful that I got a second chance; as a result, I got my job back because of this program giving me this opportunity."*

*"Program was great; great working at Danny Woo. People were great; AmeriCorps leaders were really great. I want to be like them."*

*"Community Court reminded me of who I used to be and who I'm trying to become. Being accountable is important. I'm grateful."*

*"Never knew about resources here. What you put into this is what you get out. The Self-Awareness class is awesome. Everyone should do it; even without being charged."*

The idea of CC was and still is, that if you give the participant the tools to succeed, hold the participant accountable, and have collaboration of all those in the criminal justice system along with community partners ALL will benefit. The city will be safer and more livable; the taxpayers will see reduce costs, and the Community Court participants will reap benefits that are unimaginable.

As the above comments reveal, something appears to be working. More importantly, it also reveals that this program can make a difference to those who successfully participant in the 2.0 Community Court.



[www.seattle.gov/  
communitycourt/](http://www.seattle.gov/communitycourt/)



## HAPPY HOLIDAYS from Seattle!

### Changing lives through service

The hallmark of the Community Court Program, especially for AmeriCorps members, is the chance to hear from participants about their stories, backgrounds, struggles, and future plans. Much of this storytelling happens out at community service sites or in the Self-Awareness Workshop where clients feel safe enough to open up and share meaningfully about the trajectory of their life. When Joey and I met Tom this summer, he seemed quiet about the prospects of Community Court and uncertain about how the process would unfold. He was already living in stable housing, biking daily, and on a path towards a clean and sober lifestyle.

He completed his first community service day at the St. Vincent de Paul Food Bank, where he was assigned to hand out bread. However, he was so eager to work directly with clients that he quickly jumped into the role of grocery carrier, assisting families with children, elderly individuals, and anyone who needed a little extra help to the bus stop or their cars. On his second day of community service at the Yesler P-Patch, he cleared an entire swath of weeds by lunchtime, quietly and confidently completing the tasks set forth for him. His gardening skills seemed to come alive from that point forward. By the end of the day at Yesler, he had signed up for the P-Patch plot waiting list and began to open up more about what he wanted from the Community Court program and from his life moving forward.

For the next few weeks, Tom completed the majority of his service hours in P-Patches, gardens, or at Marra Farm in South Park, further honing his gardening skills. Even after his required community service hours were finished, he returned on several occasions for optional volunteer time, putting in extra work at the farm and with graffiti abatement. Tom is an avid musician, extremely knowledgeable about artists, genres, and upcoming live music performances. Every day he returned to the court, he'd bring new music suggestions, and soon thereafter, he started sharing CDs with Joey and me – a small slice into his life's passion. One day I mentioned to him that I was interested in starting drumming lessons. Now, he reminds me whenever I see him in court that I should pursue drumming, serving now as an inspiration for me.

Tom is currently enrolled at South Seattle Community College and on track to complete an 18-month program in culinary arts focusing on baking. He worked in kitchens for over 18 years and believes the next best step is to become a pastry chef. He noted to me several times the value the program had on him, specifically the chance to work alongside healthy, productive people who were there to propel him in the right direction and increase his self-esteem. Indeed, there are so many other participants like Tom who have taken full advantage of what Community Court can offer, improving their lives and the lives of others in community. This interaction – a truly reciprocal relationship – is a key feature of the Seattle Community Court program. In the program, participants begin to feel like valued, cherished members of a community and in turn, give back heartily to this community. I am confident that Tom will continue to be an impactful, lively member of the community, and I hope he continues to volunteer on a regular basis!

*Written by Emily Caris, former Community Court AmeriCorps member.*

#### QUESTIONS?

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