Nuestras Raices

United States
Daniel Ross

Concise Summary: Help us pitch this solution! Provide an explanation within 3-4 short sentences.

Immigrant, refugee and ethnic elders mentor younger men, working together using agrarian heritage and skills to develop leadership and make inner-city communities vibrant and healthy.
Your idea

Year the initiative began (yyyy)
1992

YouTube Upload
Project URL (include http://)
http://www.nuestras-raices.org

Plot your innovation within the mosaic of solutions

Which of these barriers is the primary focus of your work?
Culture of no accountability: Neither society nor men at risk act accountable to each other

Which of the principles is the primary focus of your work?
Unleash creativity that channels experiences of risk and vulnerability toward leadership

If you believe some other barrier or principle should be included in the mosaic, please describe it and how it would affect the positioning of your initiative in the mosaic:
Principle - We can grow the community we want to live in.

Innovation

Describe your program or new idea in one sentence.
Immigrant, refugee and ethnic elders mentor younger men, working together using agrarian heritage and skills to develop leadership and make inner-city communities vibrant and healthy.

What makes your initiative uniquely positioned to create change in your community?
Young men need identity, role models, structure and the opportunity to express themselves with actions. Nuestras Raices engages young men in using their energy to improve our community in the context of their heritage, culture and environment, providing what the young men need, while helping them be the leaders our community needs, actors of positive change.

Many of our older community residents grew up on the farms of rural Puerto Rico, first coming to northeast as migrant farm workers, now proud to use their experiences and skills to improve decayed, violent inner-cities, making farms, businesses, parks and art, while teaching a younger generation.

Young men learn their identity and role in society from elders while growing food and building community, reminiscent of traditional villages.

Describe how you organize and carry out your work?
Nuestras Raices (Our Roots) is a grassroots organization that promotes economic, human and community development through projects relating to food, agriculture and the environment. Men of all generations work together, older men teaching and mentoring youth, to improve the community with hands-on environmental and economic development projects and organizing, growing from our heritage of agriculture.

Based in the inner-city Latino community of Holyoke, MA, it is now working with immigrant, refugee and ethnic communities throughout the region and country.

What is your plan to scale and expand your innovation into your community and beyond?
Immigrant, refugee and ethnic communities throughout the country have agrarian roots and cultures. Nuestras Raices is working with immigrant and refugee community gardeners and farmers in our region and throughout the country to expand their efforts from just agricultural to youth development, intergenerational and mentoring projects, food&ag-related entrepreneurial ventures, environmental stewardship, and policy change.

Nuestras Raices staff and youth leaders deliver workshops at conferences throughout the country, lead tours, and teach workshops at our Nuestras Raices Farm site in Holyoke, MA, training new leaders and teachers. We are working on a multi-lingual training curriculum and written materials and training a core of additional youth and adult lead trainers. We market our trainings and model at conferences and through partnerships with state, regional and national immigrant and refugee organizations. We are developing and branding our farmer cooperative to market our products and our model throughout the northeast.

What other resources, institutional, or policy needs would be necessary to help sustain and scale up your idea?
Nuestras Raices is developing a strong partnership with the Massachusetts Office of Refugees and Immigrants (MORI) and MORI staff are
promoting our model to counterparts around the country, expanding their understanding of their mission from simply helping immigrants set foot in this country and hopefully become laborers, to more of a community-building approach. The 2007 US Farm Bill contains many provisions that will support and grow our idea as it expands to additional communities. We are working with regional workforce development authorities to engage them in supporting our model. But our idea depends much less on top-down resources and policy as it does on grassroots collaboration between inner-city communities. Even as these resources fall into place, our idea is already scaling up as we work, community to community, sharing and teaching.

Impact

Describe your impact in one sentence, commenting on both the individual and community levels.

Young men are leaders in our communities, learning from elders, realizing our power to make profound and visible changes in our cities.

What impact has your work achieved to date?

Young Latino men are transforming the face of our city and we are teaching other communities of color to develop similar programs:
- Young men graduating, obtaining jobs, opening businesses, involved as positive leaders in our community, instead of being gang members, dropouts, addicts, locked up
- Community gardens throughout the city, in schools and after-school programs, urban farms and community centers, beautifying the city and making it healthier
- Start up of small food and agriculture-related businesses, i.e. catering, restaurants, farms, aquaculture.
- Sports and fitness programs with hundreds of young people
- Improved city environment, better air quality, fewer brownfields and vacant lots, improved nutrition, lower community food insecurity
- Community-led policy coalitions addressing environmental justice, youth issues and health & fitness, confronting disparities and improving community health

Number of individuals served

15 youth leaders (young inner-city men) per year, 30 summer youth paid trainees per year, 75 youth gardening participants per year, 120 families of community gardeners, 12 new commercial farmers, 10 food entrepreneurs with 17 employees, 20 college interns, 50 youth air testers and environmental leaders presented to 150 community forum participants, 60 trained community leaders, 150 community and agency member policy coalition participants, 2,500 Festival de la Cosecha (Harvest Festival) attendees and 5,000 attendees of other cultural activities in summer 07, 8,000 children in Holyoke Public Schools eating healthier food, 10,000 customers of youth-managed farmers’ markets and farm stand, 40,000 citizens of healthier, stronger Holyoke. 5 Somalian refugee farmers and 5 farmers from former Soviet Union beginning similar intergenerationally culturally-based food systems projects in nearby cities.

Community impact

Young men worked with elders and community and accomplished: 5 murals in Holyoke and area schools, 10 vacant lots transformed to community gardens growing over $120,000 of nutritious produce by and for low-income people, 30 acres of urban farm land and critical endangered species habitat conserved and improved, started 12 farms and 10 new businesses, a blighted building turned into the Centro Agricola community agricultural center in downtown Holyoke, 6 industries trained in clean production systems and two polluting facilities stopped resulting in cleaner air, festivals celebrated community culture and attract tourists, launched Holyoke Youth Task Force, Holyoke Food & Fitness Policy Council and Holyoke Organizing to Protect the Environment resulting in community leadership, improved networking and efficiency and local policy changes. Over $2,000,000 of yearly community economic impact (Williams College study). Two new communities are organizing themselves to use model.

Society at large

Inner-cities throughout country and world revitalized by young men of color, rebuilding understanding and respect between generations, changing stereotypes, developing green, beautiful, diverse, vibrant, healthy, Just, equitable, sustainable communities.

What measure do you use to gauge your impact and why?

numbers of young people engaged in projects and positive outcomes in their lives - good grades, jobs. We track the community changes accomplished by the young people - gardens, food produced, environmental changes, new businesses, health benefits. We track changes in attitudes community members have about young people and we track the change in image people have about our city from the outside. We track institutional and policy change as young people, joined by adult community members, lead and advocate.

Sustainability

How is your initiative currently being financed and how would you finance further expansion and/or replication?

Initiative is currently financed with earned income, government (state and federal) and foundation grants. Earned income is generated by community member-owned small businesses launched with support from Nuestras Raices that rent space in NR's unique beautiful facilities, i.e. restaurants, farms, catering businesses, artisan bakery, farm store, greenhouse operation and more. NR is focusing on growing earned income through more ventures.

As Nuestras Raices' initiatives crosscut fields of environment (conservation, education, organizing), economic development, social justice, education, nutrition & health, culture, etc., we nimbly access diverse funding streams.

Nuestras Raices is launching a training institute to support replication of its model. With initial state and foundation seed money, Nuestras Raices Institute is designed to be self-sustaining with income from paid trainings and publications.

Provide information on your current finances and organization:

27 staff - 7 full-time adult staff, 5 part-time adult staff, 15 paid youth staff. 14 college interns, 100s of community volunteers from community gardens, youth groups, corporations, local churches, colleges, probation dept. etc.

Who are your potential partners and allies?

Nuestras Raices has innumerable partners across all the fields in which we work - other youth organizations, environmental organizations, community development organizations, workforce development, cultural organizations, etc.

We see our partners for replication/expansion of our model as being immigrant, refugee and people-of-color organizations in early stages, often doing community gardening, and looking for powerful ways of using their own assets to help youth & teens and address the issues of their community.

Who are your potential investors?

Federal Office of Immigrants and Refugees, workforce development funders, Massachusetts Office of Refugees and Immigrants and similar agencies throughout country, USDA, WK Kellogg Foundation, environmental funders looking to diversify field, and social enterprise funders.

Commercial and minority business lenders for financing of new food & agriculture enterprises - farms, restaurants, greenhouse ventures, etc.

The Story

What is the origin of this innovation? Tell us your story.

This innovation grew from the bricks and rubble of a vacant lot in South Holyoke, one of their poorest neighborhoods in Massachusetts and the country. Older community members began cleaning up the vacant lot, clearing trash, needles, vials, and the remains of a church that had burned down. Using their experience and skills from growing up on farms in Puerto Rico and from years doing migrant labor on the farms of the northeast US, they created La Finquita community garden and made it flourish with vegetables, herbs, fruits and flowers.

The older gardeners wanted to pass on their knowledge and heritage to the children of their neighborhood and they set aside a plot within the garden for the kids. We contacted a bilingual science teacher in a neighborhood school, who began bringing several of her students one day per week after school. The kids liked digging in the dirt, seeing their products grow, spraying water, the time with positive mentors, being part of something important, and they kept coming back. As these children grew up each year, bringing in new participants, the program and organization has grown with them, adding field trips, college tutors, murals, jobs, environmental research and education, and business enterprises. Together the youth and elders have been learning and working together, revitalizing the city, and beginning to work with other communities throughout the region and country.

Please provide a personal bio. Note this may be used in Changemakers marketing material.

Daniel Ross was born in NYC and grew up working on a farm in Montague, MA. He has been ED of Nuestras Raices for 12 years during which time the organization has grown in programs, membership, budget and staff each year. He has been recognized for his leadership and innovation with a Brick Award by Do Something in 1997 and an Ashoka Fellowship for social entrepreneurship in 2007. He has a BA from Oberlin College, 3 children.

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