Introduction

Environment, Nutrition, and Resource Investment in Community Health (ENRICH) was created to empower and educate Maywood community members to better their health and their neighborhood through Nutritional education and Environmental Renewal. Maywood is a low income community with extremely high rates of teen pregnancy, poor health literacy, and failing schools. Limited access to fresh/healthy foods combined with the readily available fast food shops and liquor stores has contributed to the high prevalence of obesity in the Village. Among adults in Maywood, the obesity rate stands at over 50%, with rates for young women at over 65%; children also experience a high burden of obesity.

Community gardening has grown in the US and has been shown to increase willingness to try new foods (like unknown vegetables) and to increase total numbers of fruits and vegetables consumed. This finding combined with studies showing increased social cohesion and neighborhood attachment in those participating in community gardens led to the establishment of the ENRICH Natural Learning Center as a potential positive force in the community.

Methods

1. Creating the ENRICH Natural Learning Center (ENLC)
   - Designed the garden’s structure and goals with Environmental Engineer, Richard Fisher
   - Partnered with Maywood Fine Arts (MFA) for instrumental community support and land
   - Recruited Stritch faculty and students to build the actual structure of the garden
   - Applied for and received national and Loyola-funded grants

2. Creating community partnerships
   - Invited Maywood residents, MFA participants, and Loyola students and faculty to register to care for a vegetable plot for the summer. A one-time fee bought seedlings and volunteer help. All produce was then the participant’s to take home
   - Met with community organizations to establish ties and create children’s programs in the garden

Results

1. Creating ENLC
   - Transformed an empty lot into the ENLC complete with over 30 vegetable plots, a stage, mural, and community space
   - Continuing partnership with MFA, Stritch, and Community members

2. Creating community partnerships
   - Over 3 seasons, we have welcomed over 30 families, students, and faculty to care for plots
   - Partnered with community organizations like Maywood Fine Arts, Pee Wee Daycare, Loyola’s Wellness Wizards and I Can Grow programs, and Broadview’s Urban Garden Connection which combined brought over 50 children to the garden each season
   - Created a separate raised vegetable bed purely for the purpose of teaching

Conclusion

Much of the last 3 years has been devoted to the physical creation of ENRICH and the beginnings of community partnerships. Overall, we have been successful in these goals and have seen community members take leadership in the garden management and new projects being inspired by our success.

Next steps will see ENRICH expand its community ties and involve community members in ever more important roles in the organization’s management. Further efforts to evaluate the success of the garden should be attempted focusing on the goals of increased health and awareness as well as increased community engagement.

References