

Think about how far you live from a grocery store. A couple of miles? Maybe a 5-minute drive?

What if you didn't have a car? What if your trip to the grocery was a 4-mile walk or more, round-trip. With a half-dozen heavy grocery bags. After a long day of work. In all kinds of weather.

Many of us take our easy access to food for granted. Need a box of pasta to make dinner tonight? No problem, just hop in the car.

For residents of Cincinnati's Avondale and North Avondale neighborhoods, putting food on the table is a daily challenge. Drive down Reading Road, which bisects both neighborhoods, and you'll see that the problem isn't access to food, per se. Dollar stores, neighborhood convenience shops, delis — they all sell edibles.

In their 2011 report on food and health in Hamilton County, authors from Mari Gallagher Research & Consulting wrote of these retailers, "Generally — and while there are exceptions and retailers such as pharmacies who are beginning to stock more healthful foods — bakeries, convenience stores, pharmacies, dollar stores, and gas stations are fringe food providers, offering little or no healthful foods. Gas stations, for example, offer highly convenient snack items such as chips, soda, donuts, ready-made hot dogs, and so on. Many also specialize in lottery tickets, tobacco, and alcohol."

The report, which was commissioned by the Hamilton County Public Health Department, WeTHRIVE, and the Center for Closing the Health Gap and funded by a grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, found the real food

problem in Avondale and North Avondale was one of balance: "In a community with food balance, the nearest mainstream grocer is roughly the same distance as the nearest fringe food venue. We consider such an area to be in balance in terms of food access; it is just as easy or difficult to reach one or the other food establishment."

Since Avondale's Aldi store closed in 2008, the closest mainstream grocery is a Kroger store in either St. Bernard or Corryville, each 2 to 3 miles from the heart of Avondale. The report found the Avondales to be moderately to highly out of balance — meaning, access to non-healthful foods greatly outweighed access to nutritious foods.

Along Reading Road in North Avondale, on a piece of church property dotted with huge trees and growing tomato plants, a small group of people is working to shift that balance.

MAKING A DENT

Gabriel's Place is a community-services organization that's committed to improving access to nutritious food and empowering neighbors to choose a path toward a healthier way of life. Housed in the former St. Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church and supported in part by the Episcopal Diocese of Southern Ohio, Gabriel's Place is taking a three-pronged approach to improving nutrition in the community:

Growing — with a small urban farming effort on the property and at a second location nearby, plus community garden plots where neighbors can grow their own food;

Providing — through a weekly year-round marketplace that sells fresh produce, a commercial kitchen that's available for community programs, and a twice-a-week free lunch called Mom's Meals;

Educating — cooking classes for youth and adults, alongside health initiatives including a smoking-cessation program, blood pressure screenings, and nutrition education.

Gabriel's Place had its beginning in an end: the closing in 2008 of the St. Michael and All Angels Episcopal parish. While the church's membership had dwindled, the Episcopal Diocese of Southern Ohio wanted to maintain a ministry presence in Avondale. It donated land adjacent to the church building to the Avondale Community Council as a garden to be tended by Avondale teens and the weekly "Mom's Meals" soup kitchen, a 20-plus-year project that serves 80 people a week and is shepherded by parishioner Audrey Scott, would continue.

Programming continued in fits and starts over the next three years, as new partners emerged and committed funding: Cincinnati Children's Hospital, the Hamilton County Community Action Agency, and Chase Bank among them. A meeting between diocesan officials and these new partners yielded the Gabriel's Place name and mission: to provide "a safe, beautiful, and spiritually nourishing place for the Avondale Community to gather in mutual respect to learn, interact, and go out in peace." By 2010, grants and donations enabled renovation of the parish building into a multi-purpose space; additional dollars →

went to build and equip a new commercial kitchen. The following year, a monthly market stand opened to sell fresh produce to the community and the gardens were overhauled.

Food — access, knowledge, opportunity — has emerged as the centerpiece that mission. “We’re making a dent in it,” says Gabriel’s Place program manager Troy Frasier of the neighborhood’s food-access problem. “It’s a small dent at this point,

but it’s possible in the future to have a huge impact.”

MAKING HEALTHY FOOD AVAILABLE

On a hot afternoon, one in that string of nearly unbearably steamy days we had in July, Frasier, 33, marshaled a group of teenagers from the Avondale Youth Council working in the garden. This volunteer program, which aims to teach kids leadership and life skills, is an active presence at Gabriel’s Place. Under the guidance of Frasier (who came to Gabriel’s Place in 2010 as an AmeriCorps member) and a college intern, the kids planted rows of tomatoes, okra, collard greens, potatoes, and other vegetables in the community garden that takes up a big chunk of the former church property. Too, they worked the soil and created planting beds in a garden plot in Martin Luther King Jr. Park, just a few blocks up Reading Road.

By August, the dozen individual plots in the community garden — which are rented for a nominal fee, planted and managed by folks from the neighborhood — were looking predictably weather-beaten. On the garden’s opening day back in April, the plot owners (a diverse mix of doctors, UC students and residents of the Avonview senior complex across the street) enthusiastically planted seeds and seedlings. Like many gardeners, they fought a losing battle with weeds and water, despite efforts by volunteers to keep everything hydrated during the drought. It’s been a rough summer, but Frasier hopes that a soon-to-be-hired garden manager can help boost production through the fall and into next season. In a hoop house on the property, Frasier has started an aquaponic program, a closed-loop system where water filters from a pond stocked with bluegill and circulates through raised planting trays filled with watercress, arugula and other greens. A chicken coop is under construction.

Food that’s grown by Gabriel’s Place (along with any extras from the individual plots) is available for sale during the

Thursday market, which has gone from monthly to weekly. On another hot summer afternoon, 30-year-old Leslie Stevenson, the organization’s volunteer coordinator and an AmeriCorps VISTA member, directed a couple of women from the neighborhood as they set up tents and arranged the display of fruits and vegetables. Stevenson’s proud of her volunteer corps, four women who live in the Avonview and Beechwood senior apartment buildings in Avondale. In fact, those two complexes are the most significant customer base for the market, which serves a couple dozen shoppers and browsers each week.

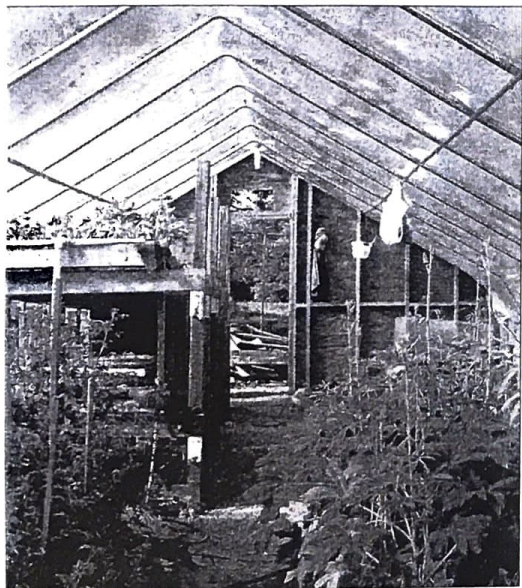
While Gabriel’s Place is increasingly able to grow vegetables for sale, Frasier continues to purchase most of the produce from a wholesaler. The market is approved for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as food stamps) and in late August was awaiting a terminal so Stevenson could accept SNAP payments. A new partnership with Green BEAN Delivery to provide the produce has Frasier and Stevenson excited about the market’s future. “We’re really trying to engage parents, to draw their attention here on Thursdays,” Stevenson says. “We have a small core of repeat shoppers,” she says. “We’re seeing a trend up in word of mouth, and people stopping while they’re passing by.”

Ultimately, Frasier and Stevenson hope to include Mom’s Meals in the farm-to-plate loop, so the soup kitchen can offer super-fresh food to those in need. The situation is a little tricky: Scott, affectionately known as Miss Audrey, has managed the lunch program for more than two decades (a member agency of Freestore Foodbank and sponsored by Calvary Church), and Frasier and Stevenson want to be respectful in suggesting changes.

TEACHING THE COMMUNITY

Education is the third leg of the Gabriel’s Place stool, the newest component with perhaps the greatest potential for impact. Grant funding secured by the Diocese of Southern Ohio and the Hamilton County Community Action Agency created a commercial kitchen (stocked with food and supplies through donations from Xavier University, the Avondale Community Council, and others) that will be a hub for cooking classes, demos, and gatherings. The kitchen opened with a demonstration event on Food Revolution Day, May 19.

Over the summer, Gabriel’s Place



Top: A hoop house lined with reclaimed wood with the words “Do Right!” that greet gardeners daily. Middle: Aside from the okra and tomatoes the three-tiered aquaponics system grows swiss chard and broccoli on the top level and micro-greens on the middle level. The final tier of the system is a water reservoir that recycles water and nutrients into a pond where the staff raises fish year-round. Bottom: Leslie and Troy organize programs during market days such as the talented youth from Elementz, A Place for Hip-Hop and Respect. Here Ajoke Farrell, a member of the waitstaff at Nada, takes the stage in front of the market tents.