

URBAN Farming

Growing Hope In Forgotten Communities

By Matt Collins

On a once burned out lot overlooking the hazy Birmingham skyline, an experiment is underway: a farm in the middle of the city. This is just one of the lots "reclaimed" by the Jones Valley Urban Farm Project (JVUF). The project recently received a \$5,000 donation from the Alabama Farmers Federation and Alfa Insurance in support of its efforts to reintroduce people to agriculture while helping to revitalize neighborhoods. The donation will go towards JVUF's current operations as well as planned expansions.

"We want to reconnect people to food," said Jeff deGraffenried, project coordinator for JVUF. "We feel like a lot of people have really lost

their way. They don't understand agriculture anymore or where their food comes from. We are providing not only a learning opportunity for youth but also the community can come together and have a place to grow fruits and vegetables."

JVUF, named for Jones Valley where Birmingham is located, is an organic farming project that has taken three lots in the Birmingham area and converted them into productive agricultural operations. These locations had previously been unusable, whether occupied by burned-out houses or as sites of illicit activities. Now the farms, two in Birmingham's Southside and downtown and one in Avondale, are pleasant and productive additions to the surrounding communities.

In addition, JVUF provides educational opportunities. Students at the



Jefferson County Farmers Federation President Randy Gilmore, right, presents a check to Jeff deGraffenried, project manager for Jones Valley Urban Farm. Also present is Alabama Farmers Federation Horticulture Director Brian Hardin.

Alabama School of Fine Arts (ASFA) are allowed to work at JVUF as part of a class credit. The students help in planting, maintenance

and harvesting at the three locations plus a "mini-farm" at ASFA. While working with JVUF, the students receive instruction in subjects such as botany and soil science.

JVUF is planning to make the downtown loca-





Vegetables grow in JVUF's plot in the east Avondale community where a gazebo, donated by the City of Birmingham, adds some scenic charm to the once depressed area.

tion next to U.S. Highway 280 into a one-acre demonstration urban farm to show people in the community how to grow fruits and vegetables while living in the city. This will mean expanding the farm at that site and increasing the variety of crops grown.

"It takes showing people how crops are grown," said Robert Dickey, manager of JVUF. "They have to see it go from seed to table to see the care, maintenance and nurturing it takes to get grade A produce from any field to the supermarket."

Produce and cut flowers from JVUF are sold at local farmers markets in the Birmingham area. Some of the produce also is sold to high-end restaurants in the city, and any surplus is donated to Magic City Harvest, a food bank in the Avondale area.

"People forget that agriculture is a renewable resource," said Jefferson County Farmers Federation President Randy Gilmore, who presented the check to JVUF. "Silver, coal and gold will all run out, but you can always replant a crop. And big cities need green space like this to help keep the air clean."

As an urban farm, JVUF faces problems not often encountered on agricultural operations outside the city, including drug users and homeless individuals trespassing

onto the farm plots.

"One homeless person kept coming onto one of the locations," said deGraffenried. "One of our directors told him that if he came back they would have to call the police. The director asked him why he kept coming back if he knew he would get in trouble. The man looked at him and said 'It's so nice here.'"

The community response Dickey and deGraffenried have seen has been positive, though people in the neighborhoods don't always understand exactly what JVUF is trying to accomplish. Workers at businesses sometimes come to JVUF's locations to eat lunch in a park-like atmosphere

overlooking the city skyline, according to deGraffenried.

Dickey has encountered people in the communities who were initially unsure of what to think of JVUF moving in until they saw the benefit of the gardens to their neighborhoods. "When they got their property assessments and saw their property values had gone up, they said 'We don't know what exactly you're doing over there, but keep doing it!'"

JVUF has received help from many parts of the community ranging from assistance from the city government to neighbors watching the farm when no one is there.

"The response from the community has been positive," said deGraffenried. "We basically take old burned-out lots that are eyesores and essentially turn them into parks."

"Jones Valley Urban Farm is a great program that doesn't just tell people about agriculture but shows it to them in their own neighborhoods," said Brian Hardin, horticulture director for the Alabama Farmers Federation. "The program also does a lot to improve the communities it has moved into by reclaiming land that was unusable." ■



Students from the Alabama School of Fine Arts learn as they work on JVUF's downtown location. The highway just beyond the plot is U.S. Highway 280.