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### Oral Histories of Community Gardens in the Rust Belt of Michigan

Albion is located within a food apartheid— with one grocery store and a small supermarket, Albion residents are left with little options to access healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate food. In combination with Albion’s large impoverished community, food apartheid creates an environment where many people cannot access food. In fact, this combination has such a large impact on the population that 78.6% of children in Albion live below the poverty line. While we cannot blame these two factors entirely for this data, we can recognize a direct correlation. What can be done to combat this? Among many community organizations that host soup kitchens, community style grocery pickups, meals on wheels, I have become most familiar with the Albion Community Garden. This past spring, I took a course called WGS 250: Gender and the Global Garden. Through this course, I had the opportunity to learn about the impact of the Albion Community garden. However helpful community gardens are in combating food insecurity, they are often run through volunteer work, which can be unreliable, and often has high rates of turnover. Through FURSCA, I hoped to find ways to make community gardens more sustainable. What areas need more support? Funding, volunteers, outreach, resources, etc?

At the beginning of my FURSCA project, I had a set list of interview questions that were designed to explore how different gardens were governed, and five gardens that I wanted to interview. My goals were simple: express the importance of community gardens and find ways to make them last longer. I quickly realized that I needed far more participants to accurately express the importance of these organizations, but also to find concrete evidence to support the ways to keep them running. The research I did outside of interviewing opened my eyes to the power of civic engagement. Community gardens allow people to directly help in solving a tangible problem— food insecurity. In addition, community members are able to spend time in nature, which has been proven to improve mental health. What is more, my time spent volunteering at the Albion Community Garden helped demonstrate the level of work required to operate an organization like this.

At the end of my project, I interviewed 12 participants from 6 different community gardens across lower Michigan, and I plan to do more! This project led me in so many different ways than I had originally expected, and I petitioned to extend my period of data collection, which was approved! Though my data collection is not complete, there are emerging themes related to the sustainability of community gardens. First, is succession planning. Many of the longstanding organizations (more than 5 years) expressed that planning for high rates of turnover has allowed their gardens to remain successful. Volunteer work can be sporadic and unreliable, but it is often necessary, so succession planning allows community organizations to flow with this type of work. Second, many participants said that working within their means was one of the

biggest factors in the sustainability of their gardens. Understanding the limits of the people most involved, and the level of outside help offered is key to ensuring that volunteers/workers are not discouraged with their work.

In the future, I hope to interview at least 4 more community gardens to help solidify my data. Further, I will use this data to write my Honors Thesis and present at the Elkin Isaac Symposium and the National Women's Study Association Conference. Most importantly, I hope to bring valuable knowledge to the Albion Community Garden to continue working against food insecurity in Albion. This project has been an incredible opportunity for myself, and is of great importance to my college experience. I am so thankful for the opportunity to allow my passion to be funded by my work, and I will forever be grateful for this.