

# Graduates like Chris Epps show the power and reach of Windy City Harvest

On the corner of Madison and Greenwood in Maywood, Christopher Epps tends to his garden. “Locally grown produce” may just seem like a concept to some who happen upon this urban plot, located next to a salvage business and across from a high school. But from the budding 1,600-square-foot garden, Epps sees big things.

“We don’t just grow food here, we grow people,” says Epps, 37. “That’s the most important part of this job to me: securing the future.”

Epps credits his success to Windy City Harvest, the Chicago Botanic Garden’s urban agriculture education and jobs-training initiative. He’s now a full-time gardener at the Proviso Partners Giving Garden, a two-year-old urban farm program that is sponsored by Loyola University Medical Center in Maywood and Proviso Partners for Health.

It was at Windy City Harvest where he found his niche in life.

“The garden is my refuge,” Epps said. “In the city there’s a lot of chaos, a lot of bad things happen every day. At Windy City Harvest, it was like a family experience. They took time to ask if you were okay, and followed up with you if you didn’t get a job after graduation. They invested in the people. If I can help one person get the experience I had, that’s my obligation.”

That’s the goal of Windy City Harvest: to build a trained workforce that extends urban agriculture knowledge and principles throughout the Chicago area. With graduates like Epps, Windy City Harvest is building a network of farmers who are using plants as a way to create jobs and grow healthy communities.

Windy City Harvest began in 2003 with the Youth Farm, and has grown to include Apprenticeship, a nine-month



*Christopher Epps is applying the skills he learned at Windy City Harvest to the Proviso Partners Giving Garden in Maywood.*

classroom and hands-on certificate course in sustainable urban agriculture; the Entrepreneur and Career program, where students can take additional courses in industry-specific topics and a Farm Incubator program; and Corps, a transitional jobs program for ex-offenders and veterans. Since 2011, 20 Corps graduates have graduated from the Apprenticeship program, with 13 of those going on to work in local food-related jobs. Three Corps and Apprenticeship graduates have also graduated from the incubator program, where they started their own farm businesses.

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Epps began in Corps, and went on to do work study and the Apprenticeship program. It was in Apprenticeship that Epps and his classmates learned the technical skills and the basics for becoming a farmer in the city through lessons such as how to make a crop plan, how to start seeds, and how to conserve water.

“Chris was the guy who was always there [at the garden],” said Eliza Fournier, program director of Windy City Harvest. “I don’t think he missed a day. He was always the steady one motivating his peers.”

As Windy City Harvest grows, graduates continue to pollinate Chicago’s urban agriculture scene. It’s not uncommon to visit a local food-related business and meet someone with one or two degrees of separation from the Apprenticeship program, according to Fournier.

In addition, more local organizations are looking to the Garden as a thought leader in Chicago’s urban agriculture movement because of successes like Epps, said Kelly Larsen, director of operations at Windy City Harvest.

“People like Chris really know how to articulate why the local movement is important to these companies,” Larsen said. “It’s empowering on a broader level. Many people who come through the Windy City Harvest program haven’t worked before, or have had a big gap in employment. They learn the technical and soft skills to excel in the workforce, and Chris has really used his resources to do that.”

A former forklift operator at Waste Management who craved a more fulfilling career, Epps said his Windy City Harvest experience gave him the practical skills to transform his life, and to put his hometown of Maywood on the path from a fresh-food-scarce neighborhood to a community centered on healthy eating. His vision? Epps hopes to eradicate the food insecurity in Proviso Township High Schools District 209 by building another twelve farms in Broadview, Maywood, and Bellwood.

“In order for this garden to work and be sustainable, the community needs to be involved,” Epps said. “That’s sort of like my main job, to plug in the people in the community. I like to harness the potential in people because it was done for me.”

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