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Food on Wheels

BY BECKY ST. CLAIR

Although Sarah Forrest calls Berrien Springs, Michigan, home, she has lived a nomadic life, moving often between countries and states. “Those experiences have helped me develop great people skills,” she says, “which is absolutely required for this job!”

Sarah, manager of the Mobile Farm Market for the Andrews University Department of Agriculture, spends her summer days with agriculture students, driving a refrigerated truck full of produce around southwest Michigan.

“We work hard to make healthy food choices available within the food deserts of our community,” Sarah explains. “We aim to create sustainable changes by partnering with farms and communities.”

Food deserts are created when supermarkets close and there are no alternatives within walking distance for local residents. In Benton Harbor, a city of 10,000 about 12 miles from Andrews University, food deserts are a growing concern. With nearly a quarter of the population unemployed and two-thirds living below the poverty level, the economy is far less than booming.

“Over the past year, we’ve been working with the local health department to get to know the community,” Sarah explains. “It turns out they want and need access to fresh produce.”

The Mobile Farm Market began as an experiment and has been operational since 2014. After a successful first summer, more research was done and local farmers were invited to participate.

“We build ideas from the ground up,” Sarah says. “Taking into account the responses from local people, we build models based on their needs, and it has been wonderful seeing real change taking place in the community. The best part is seeing their eyes light up when we bring them something they really need.”



University Mobile Farm Market travels around southwest Michigan, bringing fresh produce from local farms (including the University's Student Gardens) to food deserts.

In addition to the University farm, two local farms have provided produce at affordable rates for the market, even donating produce for two weeks of the summer.

“Working with farms allows us to provide a greater variety of food,” Sarah explains. “We are helping bridge the gap between farms and community. We are educating local farmers about food deserts and educating the people on local food.”

Nearly 70 percent of the area surrounding the food deserts is farmland.

Sarah is excited to connect the two and reduce local need.

“It’s not just about providing access to affordable produce,” she says. “Education is another big part of the market — teaching people the purpose of nutrition, how to make simple healthy choices, and showing them alternative ways to feed themselves and their families.”

To this end, the market staff provides recipes with the produce they sell, and even offers mini-cooking demonstrations to teach community members what to do with the various produce provided.

A survey of food desert residents in 2014 revealed that 60 percent felt they were eating healthier in their homes as a result of the market, and nearly 50 percent said they heard neighbors talking about health more than they had the previous summer.

“Food is a basic essential,” says Sarah. “We hope that by providing fresh food we are helping the community make steps toward a healthier life.”

Becky St. Clair is the media communication manager at Andrews University.