



From the desk of:
Amanda Maria Edmonds
Executive Director

December 2017

Dear Friends,

As you read in the note from our board president, at the end of December I am passing the torch, retiring as the founding Executive Director of Growing Hope. I hope this letter gives you a deeper look into who we are and where we've come from, in hopes that you see just how important it is to continue to support this work as the organization moves forward in its next chapter. While I am moving on, I believe the work is still essential, and our tagline **"...because everyone deserves healthy food and a chance to grow"** is still both as salient and urgent as ever.

Fifteen-plus years is a lot to reflect on and try to capture in one letter. I will not attempt to do so here, though hope in the coming months and years to put pen to paper frequently to reflect on my own journey and that of Growing Hope thus far.

I will tell you the short version of our origin story, though. In 1999 I worked with the principal, parents, and volunteers at Perry Child Development Center in Ypsilanti—the Ypsi Schools' public Kindergarten and Head Start site with almost 500 little ones—to build a school garden. I had been involved with development of school gardens since my own middle school years, and through my own schooling and advocacy work in environmental justice, I felt deeply that bringing people together around gardens was a powerful and positive vehicle for change at both individual and community levels. I said then and still feel now that that garden—the Perry Learning Garden—that we broke ground on in April 2000—was my greatest teacher. While I was still an undergrad myself, this was not a school project as people often assumed, and I committed—based on my beliefs around community work—to be a part of it until it could be sustainable without me. I had no idea what that would mean, how long that would take, or what it would lead to at that point.... But here we are, 18 years later. The Perry Learning Garden has gone through many iterations of ownership (by Growing Hope, the school, neighbors, and volunteers) and activity, and at times, neglect—and those cycles themselves have continued to be great teachers to me about what it means to do lasting work in and with community. It is not easy. It takes great persistence. It can be incredibly satisfying. It can be messy. And most importantly, it needs to grow and evolve as what is both in it and around it changes and evolves.

Our work in the early years—before we incorporated (and I am so grateful for early fiscal sponsorship and mentorship from Creative Change Educational Solutions and its leader, Susan Santone)—and once we were officially Growing Hope, was about using gardens as a vehicle for positive change, whether around health & nutrition, shared learning, food security, or community building. It was all of those things. I recall struggling on early grant applications that were so problem-centric. I felt strongly about being solution-focused instead, and if we can use something powerful like a garden, it addresses many problems simultaneously. I embraced the asset-based approach, building what people and communities and we had instead of what we lacked, as with the common deficit-based model. Still in the low moments where we don't feel like we have the funds, or staff, or capacity to do something, I have to remind myself that focusing instead on the positive

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and what we do have will always carry us farther. And, we believe as a core that it will carry our community farther, because it orients towards empowerment and self-reliance.

Like the Perry Learning Garden and its cycles of change, we, too, evolved and grew based on what was happening around us. The food system was, when we started, not a concept most knew. It was before the days of understanding that health and place are inextricably connected—that one's environment (including access to healthy food) had great impact on one's health and opportunity. As we and so many partners and colleagues were beginning to put words and data to these things we inherently understood, it became clear that gardens were a great starting point, but more broadly healthy food was a better core vehicle for healthy change. We began to understand why it was important in our geography—then and still now focused first on the broader Ypsilanti area—to look at the system that gardens and youth education fits into, and see where else we needed to be involved in order to affect deep and lasting change. In 2006 we began the Downtown Ypsilanti Farmers Market, which became a turning point in our work. I am still so very proud that we were the third farmers market in Michigan to accept SNAP, and are now part of a network of 159+ markets across the state who support healthy food access in this way.

In 2010 we were an instrumental part of what became, for me, another key learning moment about the importance of our systems approach. Having run a farmers market for several years, we realized a key barrier to (mostly low-income) entrepreneurs is not having access to affordable commercial kitchen space. So, we helped in the passage of the Cottage Food Law, which Governor Granholm signed into law in July 2010 at the Growing Hope Center—then a burgeoning urban farm and gardens, and a building that was a total construction zone. We know that hundreds—and likely thousands—of businesses across the state can exist and operate legally today because of this law. Many of these are women owned, and they cross geographies and political boundaries in a way that good public policy should. From there we recognized how important policy is to create the context to be doing the good work. In subsequent years, we authored the Ypsilanti Community Schools' wellness policy, helped draft and implement zoning policy around gardens and urban livestock, were a founding member of the Washtenaw Food Policy Council, and I became a gubernatorial appointee on the Michigan Food Policy Council, chairing the Healthy Food Access task force. None of this work could have been effective, though, if we weren't also working on the ground in our community, learning first hand where those policy barriers and opportunities lay.

I have so many more stories of points in our history that provided key learning for me, and that thus influenced the direction the organization grew and evolved. My greatest lesson, though—besides just knowing that at times deep hope and courage is what it takes to just keep charting forward and learning our way through the new territory—is how critical it is to be always open, learning, and ready to evolve. ...to be able to use the resources, talents, and experience we bring to the table to do the best work in the most impactful way... to engage and listen to what's happening around us locally and nationally, and pivot to best meet the need and seize the opportunity.and to recognize that what we do and the way we do must continue to change and evolve as that around us does, too....

I looked back on letters I have sent to some of our strongest supporters in each of the last many years. I think this opening to evolution, and a constant examination of our role in our community, our field, and our sector, comes through each year--

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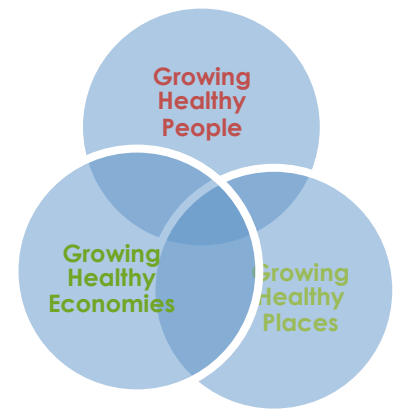


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In 2013, at our ten-year mark, I focused on the launch of a big, bold 10-year vision and strategic plan. I told stories of the young people that interned at Growing Hope and had gone on to college often focusing on food, agriculture, or sustainability—most of whom I am still very connected with today.

*...By 2023, our rooting in the Ypsilanti community will have continued and deepened, as we've created a *model* healthy, just, and sustainable local food system that positively impacts many aspects of Ypsilanti-area community, economic, and home life. Ypsilanti has a local food system in which all of our citizens—particularly those with barriers due to class, race, culture, ability, and mobility—can access healthy-affordable (and whenever possible) local food, can grow and prepare their own healthy harvests, earn a living in this realm, and can realize their dreams of being an entrepreneur... Healthy food is in demand, and a norm all around us. Our young people are healthier as this local system influences and affords them opportunities from cradle to career, including job and leadership opportunities that lead them into careers in this area; our schools also model healthy food environments...*

In 2014 I reflected on the ways our strategic plan was helping us march forward towards Growing Healthy People, Growing Healthy Places, and Growing Healthy Economies, replicating what we were best at and making sure that our work was the best response to community need... we expanded after-school youth programming for low-income kids, had a banner growth year for our two Ypsilanti Farmers Markets, and continued a solid and expanding Home Vegetable Garden program. Looking at other needs and opportunities, we assessed 33 corner stores for their interest in becoming additional points for healthy food access. We wrote a business plan to find a permanent, year-round home for the Ypsilanti Farmers Market. We stepped up our support for local food entrepreneurs.



In 2015, I created a photo montage of Growing Hope then and now, showing the landscape change at the Growing Hope Center and the Ypsilanti Farmers MarketPlace (just beginning to be developed)— contrasting long empty and derelict properties with the color and life and energy we put into them. It was satisfying to see the physical manifestation of our values and vision and know what it has done to make positive, lasting change in our community.

Socio-Ecological Model



In 2016, I reaffirmed our theory of change, and why we believe that to make deep impact that truly gives everyone a chance to grow.

Our theory of change – what academics would call the socio-ecological model of change—is that it's not just about direct services to a person. To really create change there are radiating circles of other influences to consider. So for example, a young person we teach and inspire around healthy food in an after school



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program is also affected by many other messages and influences—by those she’s getting in her classroom... by her sports team asking her to sell candy bars... by the food quality—likely two meals a day—that she eats at school... by what’s available in her home... and what healthy options do or don’t exist in her neighborhood. We know that to make the change we believe in we need to look at the barriers within all those multiple circles. Our work then, is to remove those barriers, and create greater opportunity for her to be healthy and thrive. And, if she wants, find ways to support her in becoming a young leader in this work, to find a job, to follow a career path, to become a food entrepreneur or a farmer.

Last year I also outlined three key areas of focus—

- 1) Making sure our work was more laser-focused on serving the low-income families in the broader Ypsilanti area (48197 and 48198 zip codes), for whom life expectancy is **18 years less** than it is just 30 miles west in Chelsea, MI. Access to good food is a basic human right, and something we have, and can, continue to move the needle on. We aim to reduce disparities in health, access, and opportunity, using healthy food as a vehicle.
- 2) Investing more widely and deeply in the young people in the Ypsilanti area, particularly those in our Ypsilanti Community Schools. Youth have been at the heart of our work since we built the Perry Learning Garden in 1999/2000, which led to the founding of Growing Hope in 2013. This includes ensuring healthy (and local) options in the cafeteria and classroom, supporting significant expansion of school gardens, deepening work with our teen mentors, and continuing our strong Seed2Plate clubs.
- 3) Supporting food and farm entrepreneurs through economic opportunity so that we can have thriving farmers markets that offer healthy food access, growth in local jobs, and small food businesses that are succeeding. Business navigation services, year-round vending opportunities through an expanded Ypsilanti Farmers Market, and soon to open kitchen incubator and cold storage space are among those resources and infrastructure we believe are crucial for supporting this growth.



Going forward, the organization has much to build upon from its first 15 years. A strong vision and core values, deep lasting partnerships, a mix of long-time and new supporters, program models tried (and some failed) and deep learning from each, and (as we have always had) an incredibly dedicated team of people working tirelessly each day to bring our vision to reality. ...and, we have now soon-to-be two main anchors in the Ypsilanti community. The Growing Hope Center—developed from 2007 to 2012—now five years in as our headquarters and a thriving and evolving destination for education and inspiration around growing your own food. And, by early 2018, the Ypsilanti Farmers MarketPlace, a year-round facility including our YpsiPlant Garden Supply social enterprise, the Robert C. Barnes Sr. MarketPlace Hall that will house the indoor farmers market season, events, education, and much more, an incubator kitchen and storage cooler to grow opportunities for entrepreneurs, and offices for our farmers market and economic development teams.

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It will no longer be my role to chart the next steps for Growing Hope. Of course, as someone full of endless ideas for what is possible in the world, that brings me some sadness. But, beginning earlier this year, I knew that it was nearing time to pass that torch. Just as I committed to myself in 1999 that I would be committed to the Perry Learning Garden until it could sustain without me, now is the time for my team, with the support of our community near and far—including financial supporters like you—to continue and sustain the work. I am so excited to watch—and support and cheer from the sidelines—how they continue to grow and evolve towards our mission, in ways that I could not even have imagined.

An organization that was for so long associated primarily with me is now about the work, the team, and ultimately the thousands of people we support each year in using food as opportunity for health, community, and economic opportunity. For that, I am deeply grateful and incredibly proud. I am so lucky and privileged to have taken this journey. I hope and ask you to join me in helping Growing Hope continue to grow and evolve towards even greater impact in Ypsilanti and beyond.

In gratitude,

Amanda Maria Edmonds
Founder & Executive Director