Resident Engagement Case Study: Famicos Foundation

The Famicos Foundation is a Cleveland community development organization serving the Glenville, Hough and Collinwood neighborhoods. The organization is a non-profit that functions as an affordable housing developer and social services provider. Through resident services and neighborhood outreach, Famicos helps families achieve home ownership, prevent homelessness, reach educational benchmarks, and keep youth engaged in positive activities. Famicos’ vision is to improve the quality of life in Cleveland through neighborhood revitalization and community organizing.

In an effort to improve quality of life and residential health in its service area, Famicos has implemented projects focused on the reuse of vacant land. The once blighted lots are being transformed into green space, small parks, and community gardens. Through the ReImagining Cleveland program launched in 2010, Famicos has put many vacant lots to reuse. One such lot is the home of the newly established Gateway105 Farmers’ Market. Supporting community projects such as these, Famicos has worked to engage all residents (youth as well as families) in various sustainability focused workshops.

Student Outreach

As part of their community outreach plan, Famicos targeted local high school students. The foundation’s Community Organizer, a graduate of Glenville High School, maintained a strong relationship with one of the school’s science teachers. While some students were preparing for the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT), a standardized test that must be passed for graduation, the students who successfully passed their OGTS, were engaged in the Table, Set, Go program piloted by Famicos. By the end of the program, all 15 students were participating in the lessons. The group met three times a week from February to April.

The program curriculum was developed collaboratively with NEO Restoration Alliance, a nonprofit that promotes market gardening and green job development. The lessons covered topics such as local foods, hydroponics, composting and vermicomposting, GardenSoxx, and rain

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1 http://reimaginingcleveland.org/about/
barrels. At the end of the three months, the students showcased their knowledge by hosting a Sustainability Awareness Day. The event motivated students to take an active role in their education. The student group set up tables at the Free Clinic (during an inside farmers’ market) prior to the event to practice sharing the information in their displays. During The Sustainability Awareness Day the students interacted with 32 community members as well as representatives from the Cuyahoga County Council, City of Cleveland Office of Sustainability and The USDA.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Initially, it was hard to capture and maintain the students’ attention and interest. However, meeting with the group frequently helped cultivate a relationship between the students and the Famicos’ staff. In order to spark interest with the students, the group took field trips to learn about sustainability initiatives throughout Cleveland. One of the students’ favorite fieldtrip was to the Gardens’ Under Glass, an innovative urban agriculture project located downtown². The facility showcases greenhouse hydroponics. The students learned how they grow lettuce, herbs, and other produce year round.

A Glenville High School student explains his hydroponic display at the Sustainability Awareness Day hosted by Famicos.

Rain Barrel Workshops

A rain barrel collects and stores rainwater that would otherwise be lost to runoff. Diverting this water helps protect the environment from increased erosion and decreases the polluting impact to streams. A rain barrel can save about 1,300 gallons of water during peak summer months. The rain barrel workshops are important in the Glenville and Hough neighborhoods. Doan Brook, which runs through the neighborhoods, overflows often during heavy rainfall periods. The area has also suffered from flooding and erosion problems. Rain barrels can help divert this excess water flow, especially if a majority of the community adopts this practice. The City has promoted the use of rain barrels through the Summer Rain Barrel Program, which also employs high school students to assemble and distribute the rain barrels throughout the city.

In order to promote the use of rain barrels, Famicos sponsored workshops to educate participants about rain barrels and provide them with one at no cost. The workshops were organized at a resident’s home and typically had 10 to 12 participants. Students from the Glenville High School program attended the workshops as student teachers and helped Famicos run the event. In conjunction with the City’s rain barrel program, Famicos hopes to distribute 75 barrels to the Glenville and Hough communities this year.

In addition to the residential events, Famicos has organized rain barrel workshops at Gateway105 Farmer’s Market. An educator from the NEO Restoration Alliance led the workshops. Attendees were given information on the importance of rain barrel usage. With the help of the instructor, the group put together their rain barrels, drilling inlet and outlet holes and installing a mesh screen to keep out debris.

![A rain barrel workshop held at the Gateway105 Farmer’s Market in the Glenville neighborhood.](http://www.epa.gov/region3/p2/what-is-rainbarrel.pdf)

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Garnering interest and driving attendance at new community events can be a challenge. Famicos found that hosting workshops at its facilities will not result in a successful event without doing outreach at the street and block level. Famicos has found, however, that there will always be neighborhood advocates willing to spread the word about programs. These are the people that will recruit their neighbors to come over for workshops. The results are two-fold: this technique spreads awareness, and also builds community.

Rain barrels were decorated by Glenville High School and Hawken Middle School students.

Garden Soxx Workshop

The Sustainable Cleveland 2019 initiative\(^5\) has named 2012 the “Year of Local Food”. In keeping with this theme, Famicos has hosted GardenSoxx workshops that promote local food and urban agriculture. GardenSoxx are mesh bags that contain soil and provide an easy way to grow vegetables at home. They require little maintenance and can be placed on any surface, including concrete or cement\(^6\). Famicos conducted the first workshop at the Gateway105 Farmer’s Market. Participants received four GardenSoxx and free vegetables provided by Schuster’s Westview Gardens. The twenty families that participated were also given a lesson on the concept of GardenSoxx, how they work, and best planting schemes. Participants completed a pre-survey on their prior growing knowledge and experience. Famicos is planning to follow-up with participants by meeting with them and checking on the plant growth. Using Garden Soxx is a viable growing alternative to traditional urban gardening. It is especially convenient for the elderly, disabled and the working.

\(^5\) [http://sustainablecleveland.org/](http://sustainablecleveland.org/)
\(^6\) [http://www.urbanorganicsohio.com/gardensoxx.html](http://www.urbanorganicsohio.com/gardensoxx.html)
Moving Forward

Over all, Famicos views its residential engagement strategy as a comprehensive way to teach residents healthy lifestyle strategies, build community, improve the neighborhood’s ecological footprint, and contribute to Famicos’ larger vacant land reuse and community greening efforts. Later this year, the organization plans to host composting and vermicomposting workshops. Next year, Famicos hopes to develop a comprehensive approach to delivering their sustainability information and workshops to the larger Glenville and Hough neighborhoods.

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