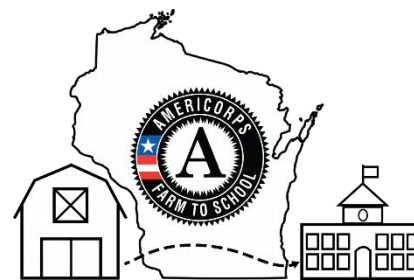


Finding Answers during my Service as a Farm to School Specialist

Maire Cait Mullen

Serving at FoodRight, Inc.



As an AmeriCorps Farm to School (F2S) specialist, I get a lot of questions from family and friends: “What is a farm to school specialist?” “Wait, like the Peace Corps? But you’re still here?” “Are you teaching” “How are you doing anything with schools in 2020?”

At the start of my program in August, I had all the same questions myself... All I really knew was that I was contracted until August 2021 to serve in Milwaukee communities (and that I needed the education award that members receive upon completion of hours to pay off student loans), but was not yet sure what this all entailed.



It started with... a lot of zoom meetings and member training. The AmeriCorps F2S members in my cohort are located all over the state of Wisconsin (though F2S is a nationwide program), working with health departments, school districts, and nonprofits that emphasize F2S values. F2S works to partner local farms and schools to create healthier school meals and reliable places to sell produce to regularly, as well as enrich children’s learning with nutrition education, culinary classes, gardening experience, farm field trips and more. In June, I interviewed with one of the nonprofits, FoodRight. Their goal is to bring culinary and gardening education to every Milwaukee child.

Prior to March 2020, FoodRight would go from classroom to classroom, school to school, teaching students at every grade level the skills to safely cook with healthy, fresh, whole foods. Students would work together to create a delicious snack or meal, all while learning math, science, geography, and reading comprehension skills. FoodRight has also developed gardening curricula with a few Milwaukee Public Schools that have campus gardens or raised beds. Empowering and teaching children by having them plant, harvest, cook, and consume their own vegetables creates a lasting impact by exposing them to new foods and experiences (and makes for a fun day at school).

These days, FoodRight is teaching virtually, either as part of Milwaukee Public School students’ school day or as an optional after school program. Teaching virtually means getting each student their own ingredient kit, packed safely ahead of time and dropped off at their school for a parent to pick up. This is, of course, much more costly to provide each student with all the ingredients, instead of one classroom of students sharing spices, whisks, and lemon wedges. However, FoodRight has completed two semesters and their summer program during a pandemic and is gearing up for next semester’s classes at a number of MPS schools this January.



Although FoodRight has wrapped up their year-end giving, they accept donations year-round. FoodRight's programming goes year-round, including three trimesters during the school year and a summer camp. Donate at their website:

www.FoodRight.org

But packing ingredient kits and assisting with cooking lessons isn't all AmeriCorps F2S members get to do. One of my most exciting days of work was not in the office kitchen or harvesting potatoes in a school garden (albeit a good time), but touring a farm in north Milwaukee. Fondy Farm was established by the nonprofit, Fondy Food Center (FFC), to support local farmers that participate in the Fondy Farmers Market and provide Greater Milwaukee with fresh, local produce. For 10 years, Fondy Farm has been offering their farmers, majority from the local Hmong American community, affordable, long term leases on their quality land, with access to amenities like tractors, irrigation and so much more that is vital to a successful and bountiful harvest. Fondy Farm works hard to support their farmers so the farmers can in turn support the local community, and make the world keep spinning 'round.



As if being in the wide-open spaces of Fondy Farm with nothing but living, breathing plants growing around you isn't magical enough, my co-AmeriCorps member, Candace, and I were invited to pick chili and banana peppers by one of the farmers harvesting that day. The farmer, Nang, showed us the best way to twist the peppers off the bush, as she whizzed by us, expertly plucking the chilis. After harvesting a few dozen peppers, Nang made sure we took some home. She, along with everyone else we met on our Fondy Farm tour, exuded generosity, kindness, and patience. There is no doubt that their compassion is absorbed by the produce they plant, tend, harvest and share to nourish our community.



Fondy Food Center operates the Milwaukee Winter Farmers Market (MWFM) on Saturdays from 8:30 a.m. - 12:30 p.m., now until March 27, 2021. MWFM hosts 28 vendors this season, although they usually host 55. Due to the pandemic, they now rotate two groups of 28, so vendors swap every other Saturday. Check out their vendor list at www.mcfwm.org/vendors

Like FoodRight and Fondy Farms, AmeriCorps F2S is all about keeping the world spinning 'round, by providing people, organizations, communities with the tools and resources they need to thrive and flourish in our ever-changing climate.