A place to grow and a place to gather

**Unity Park Community Garden**

Ozell Brownlee was a tot when he fell in love with digging his hands into the rich, black soil, working alongside his grandfather who grew “50-to-60-pound giant Black Diamond watermelons” in his Mississippi garden. Now 78, Ozell still loves growing watermelons and has added greens, kale, cabbage, tomatoes and beans to his list of favorite things to grow.

For the past several years, he’s tended to those vegetables, and other plants including herbs, at the Unity Park Community Garden. “I just like doing what I can do to give back to the community,” he says. “And I’ve gotten to meet a lot of people,” he says, just after a green station wagon rolls by, the driver honking the horn and waving a greeting.

The community garden was built to promote community involvement and to be an amenity to the area where we have built 67 long-term, lease-to-purchase homes in the area since 2015. Various groups, including PNC, and individuals have donated time each year to prepare and plant the garden and residents are welcome to work in the garden and enjoy the harvest.

This year’s tomato crop is not quite ready to pick, but Ozell said the 2017 crop was a favorite among neighbors. “The more they picked, the better it grew,” he says and laughs. “And all of the greens fill right back in when picked.”

He planned to grab a handful of greens for that night’s dinner after spending the day mowing lawns. He said it is thanks to the garden that he has his new-found career: GreenThumb Landscaping.

He was looking for something to do when his grandson, Kvondre Flullen, told him we were looking for someone to mow area lots. The two, despite their 50-year age difference, formed the business providing mowing and trimming in the warmer months and snow removal and salting in the winter. Ozell said he wanted something to keep him busy since his wife, Wessie Mae, died in 2003.
CHN recognized with CARF accreditation

This year, we sought CARF International accreditation and received it for a period of three years. This accreditation decision represents the highest level of accreditation that can be given to an organization and demonstrates our substantial conformance to the CARF standards.

We received the recognition following the rigorous, voluntary, external peer review process. As a part of the process, a team of surveyors made an on-site visit to verify our commitment to offering programs and services that are measurable, accountable, and of the highest quality.

Marc Craig, our president, said he was pleased that “The survey team acknowledged and applauded our person-first culture and dedication to providing quality services to our community.”

Some of the strengths CARF noted about us were:

- “CHN is a person-centered, dynamic, and visionary organization serving participants seeking affordable housing in Southeast Michigan. The leadership was noted for being professional; knowledgeable; mission driven; accessible; and committed to building trusting relationships with participants, staff members and other stake holders.”

- “Strong community relationships and collaborations are a key factor in the organization’s successful growth, and both leadership and middle management staff members actively participate on boards, committees and focus groups throughout the area.”

- “The organization is commended for the caring of difficult-to-serve participants. It is known that the organization’s leadership believes that everyone deserves an opportunity to live life abundantly and in his/her own home. The organization enthusiastically embraces each new participant.”

“Everyone in the organization worked hard to achieve this accreditation,” said Marc. “We had to conform to many standards and take on new responsibilities to achieve this success. Training, policies, and compliance to all the requirements happened agency wide, and every single employee stepped up and committed to the process.”

CARF is an independent, nonprofit accrediting body whose mission is to promote the quality, value, and optimal outcomes of services through a consultative accreditation process and continuous improvement services that center on enhancing the lives of the persons served. For more information about CARF, please visit their website at www.carf.org.

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and he retired from GM in 2008 “after 41.8 years of service,” he says. He did have a dump truck for a while hauling sand, rocks “or whatever needed to be moved” but business dried up with the economic downturn and he sold his truck.

“My family keeps telling me to sit down and take it easy. I just keep telling them I am doing what I like to do,” says the father of 10, grandfather of 21 and great-grandfather of 13.

These days that includes spending time in the Unity Park Community Garden. He is grateful that it started when it did because a big tree in his own backyard now leaves his once-sunny yard in full shade, not conducive to growing his favorites. At the community garden, he has gotten to know some of the neighbors, enjoys pulling weeds, nurtures his favorite plants and shares a family tradition with Niagara, a 6-year-old granddaughter. “She planted seeds in the corner of one of the beds and says she is very excited to be growing watermelons,” he says with a hearty laugh. “But now that the leaves are coming in, I can see that the seeds she planted were really cucumbers!”

Unity Park Community Garden

Bobby Townsend Jr., a volunteer with The Art Experience, Pontiac, painted the beautiful mural for the Unity Park Community Garden. He said he based his design on an image of what he thought a community garden would look like. He said he is thankful that the “staff at The Art Experience that gave me the opportunity to be a part of something like this.”
Makisha Reed’s expectant face radiated joy when she turned the key and stepped into her new home at Jefferson Oaks. She signed the lease a few moments earlier and walked to the home where she will be able to safely and affordably raise her three sons.

“No basement and no mold!” she exclaimed. Life has been tough on her family when their last apartment flooded in the fall of 2017 and mold grew up the basement walls. The family moved around, staying with various relatives and friends.

It was someone from one of her son’s Ferndale schools who initially told her about Jefferson Oaks. She is grateful her sons will all be able to remain in their same schools.

Makisha is one of the first residents moving into Jefferson Oaks as construction continues throughout the new community. Three of the townhome buildings are completed, as are the homes on the second floor of the once vacant Thomas Jefferson School.

Jefferson Oaks is a mixed-income community in Oak Park designed of high-quality residential homes built and maintained to be appealing and affordable for hard-working families and individuals.

Construction work, including the community gathering space, and landscaping will continue into early 2019.

Ground was broken on the community in June 2017. When finished, the development will offer 20 one- and two-bedroom homes in the adaptive reuse of the school. The campus will offer 40 three- and four-bedroom townhomes.

Get Involved

Bring it Home
Our annual signature fundraising event is moving to the spring! Bring it Home 2019 will be held Thursday, May 9, at Petruzzello’s, 6950 Rochester Road, Troy. Sponsorship, ticket, and attendee information will be available early 2019. If you have any questions before information is mailed and available on our website, please contact Lisa Fuhr at 248-824-7313.

Connecting for a Cause
Thank you to our new and returning supporters for making this year’s Connecting for a Cause a record-breaking fundraising event! With your help, we raised more than $7,400, most of which was directed to our Critical Needs Fund. Event photos are available on our website communityhousingnetwork.org on the Connecting for a Cause page.

Adopt A Family
Our annual holiday program serves qualified participants who are receiving housing assistance through our organization. All gifts, in-kind donations, gift-cards, and cash donations dedicated to the Adopt A Family program go directly to the families and individuals served by the program. Another way to be involved is to organize a collection drive of cleaning supplies and personal care items. If you, your family, office, church or organization is interested in being involved, please let us know of your interest by filling in the form on the Adopt A Family page on our website.
Preparing for CARF accreditation (please see article on Page 3) included the valuable process of upgrading our policies and procedures and improving efficiencies and standardization across the organization. While we always strive to stay current, or even ahead of standards, the work as a part of this process was beneficial as we move forward.

We will continue to strengthen those areas to stay in compliance, as well as track and analyze outcomes. Performing these functions are important to evaluate how successful our programs are and the impact we have on the community. It will also allow us to apply for additional funding, something that is of extreme importance to any nonprofit. Demonstrating positive outcomes, which we have long been known to have, will be constructive as we continue seeking unrestricted revenue as our funding does not always cover all of our internal infrastructure costs.

The CARF accreditation demonstrates that our organization has made a specific commitment to put the needs of those we serve at the center of everything we do, that we value the input of those we serve, and are accountable to the community.

In all of those ways, achieving CARF accreditation is valuable to CHN, as well as to the community.