



Massachusetts Promise Fellows Make Big Impact at The Food Project

June 9, 2011

Nearly a year ago, in August 2010, Joy Gary and Sally Velez-Guzman began a yearlong project as members of the Massachusetts Promise Fellowship, an AmeriCorps program. Commonly referred to as “Mass Promise Fellows,” both Joy and Sally committed themselves to the Fellowship’s mission, which seeks to improve the lives of children in order to foster healthy and independent adults of the future. For their Fellowships, Joy and Sally were placed with The Food Project, a Boston area youth development and sustainable farming organization dedicated to improving underserved communities’ access to fresh, locally grown food.

Although Joy and Sally are dedicated to the Fellowship, it is interesting to learn how they became Mass Promise Fellows. Both women sought their Fellowships in order to reach an end goal of working with The Food Project.

Having trained in culinary school, Joy’s love of food and commitment to food access expanded as she became interested in veganism and local farmers’ markets in her community. Upon learning about The Food Project from a friend, Joy explained that “I applied to The Food Project a couple of times and it didn’t quite work.” At the suggestion of The Food Project, she applied for a Mass Promise Fellowship with a Food Project placement. Joy continued: “I just think that our overall mission is what I want to do, which is educating people how to grow their own food, live sustainability, and live independently.”

After becoming interested in food access and food justice in low-access communities, Sally moved to Boston and worked as a crew leader for The Food Project’s youth program in the summer of 2008. Following her short stint with The Food Project, she moved to upstate New York to work on an educational farm, where she discovered what she liked most about food justice work.

“I felt most passionate about helping Latino communities that traditionally didn’t have access to food, so I knew that I wanted to be back at TFP,” Sally explained. “I found the Fellowship on the staff webpage and read about the Fellowship and was interested in its mission and so I applied.”

Both The Food Project and the Mass Promise Fellowship communities have benefited from Joy’s and Sally’s work, but it is evident that the greater Boston communities they have worked with to promote change have been most grateful for their labor.

Located in different offices of The Food Project, Joy (based in the Boston office) and Sally (based in the North Shore office) worked with a similar agenda in order to encourage participation among The Food Project’s community. Joy and

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Sally focused their work on the organization's Build-a-Garden and school partnership programs.

In order to promote local, homegrown food, Build-a-Garden provides homeowners with the supplies and knowledge to cultivate their own crops in their backyards. The Food Project has been running Build-a-Garden since 2007, making a big impact in the lives of individual families. Most recently, Joy and Sally have made strides to expand the program beyond this basic model, in hopes of further stimulating community interaction through gardening and food access.

In Boston, Joy has been working with the Boston Housing Authority to build gardens in communal living spaces. She has found that gardens can increase a sense of community and connect growers as they share supplies, knowledge, and their interests. In the North Shore, Sally has been involved in expanding the Lynn Build-a-Garden program. She has been laying the groundwork to create community gardens by partnering with the Lynn Food and Fitness Council and community organizations, like churches and the Housing Authority.

Through school partnerships, Joy and Sally work with elementary and middle schools in the greater Boston area in order to spread The Food Project's message to youths. Through service learning and sharing their knowledge of crops and agriculture in the context of schools' science curriculums, Joy and Sally have been able to broaden students' understanding of and relationship to food. Sally stressed that the goal of the North Shore's school partnership is to create a connection between students and The Food Project, and hopefully have their presence act as a "point of entry" so students will identify with The Food Project years later.

When asked what they found most rewarding about their time working with The Food Project as Mass Promise Fellows, they both named Kathleen Banfield, Urban Education and Outreach Coordinator, as an important influence. As a former Mass Promise Fellow, Kathleen has provided the right mix of guidance and support.

"It's been enormously gratifying for me to work with Joy and Sally," Kathleen said. "I myself was a Fellow not too long ago, and I've been able to apply that experience to helping them succeed."

Joy and Sally also noted that they are grateful for the relationships they have established with the youth as well as their friendships with other Food Project staff. Sally said that as her experience is winding down, she is pleased to have impacted others' relationships with their food. Both women emphasized the gratitude they have for the Massachusetts Promise Fellowship, lauding the Fellowship for its careful work in nurturing its community of Fellows. They also understand the role that the Fellowship has played in opening doors in the professional world and are proud to be Mass Promise Fellows.