



Rural Development • Rural Business Service • Rural Business Enterprise Grant Program

Community Food Project Grows Community Leaders

On weekday afternoons, Toña Sanchez can often be found planting vegetable starts at the Hood River greenhouse operated by local nonprofit The Next Door through its Raices program. Raices is Spanish for “roots,” which minority families here are laying down as they increase their well-being, opportunity, and civic engagement.

The Next Door offers services to low-income Latino families. Many work in local farm fields, orchards, and food processing facilities. Despite their hard work and vital contributions to the local economy, many are underemployed and struggle to make ends meet.

In 2012, USDA Rural Development awarded The Next Door a \$30,000 [Rural Business Enterprise Grant](#) to develop a farm incubator with agricultural and business training to help these families supplement their incomes. A local landowner donated the use of farmland, the Northwest Area Foundation funded a greenhouse, and other organizations, including the Presbyterian Committee on the Self-Development of People, contributed additional grant funds. With technical assistance from the Gorge Grown Food Network and Oregon State University Extension’s Master Gardeners, families soon began to grow their own healthy, organic produce.



USDA Rural Development State Director Vicki Walker (right) and Raices volunteer Joel Pelayo look on as Toña sells cucumbers to a market-goer.

Through the Raices program, two dozen families grew pesticide-free fruits and vegetables this year, improving access to healthy foods while lowering grocery costs. Eight families also sold produce at area farmers’ markets. The smaller producers earn about \$50 per week. The most active producer earns a couple thousand each season, which paid for the family’s first computer and needed home repairs.

The program’s benefits, however, don’t stop at the dinner table or the pocketbook. Selling at the market builds the confidence of immigrants who may have limited English or little interaction with the larger population. Jody O’Connor, who manages Raices at The Next Door, believes it has been a leadership program from the start.

Today, the group is forming a cooperative with assistance from the Northwest Cooperative Development Center and additional USDA technical assistance funds through the [Socially-Disadvantaged Groups Grant](#). “The co-op president and vice president are now facilitating meetings and leading policy. More of the work is done by the group than by The Next Door,” said Jody.

Toña says she, too, has become more of a leader, having started a breast cancer focus group for Latina women and families. Other Raices participants have become active in a community advisory committee.

These emerging local leaders are growing much more than healthy food for their families. They are cultivating opportunity, capacity and networks to enhance community vitality. As Toña said, “It’s all related.”

Obligation Amount: \$30,000 grant

Date of Obligation: 2012

Congressional District: Representative Walden, District 2; Senators Wyden and Merkley

Demographics: Latino community in Hood River, Oregon

Impact: New farm incubator offering agricultural and business training and resulting in new Latino community leaders.