

# Eden's garden

Pisgah Village in Highland Park reenvisioned low-income seniors reconnecting people to their food. And to one another.

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Ten women gathered around a few tables and at a sink one recent Friday afternoon to make soup, rice with vegetables and barbecued fish for a community potluck dinner.

That ordinary act — making a meal, repeated monthly — represents a profound plan to integrate food and shelter at Pisgah Village, a housing development in Highland Park for low-income senior citizens that aims to preserve the health and dignity of its residents.

Everywhere at Pisgah, named for the hill from which Moses saw the promised land, there are signs of that plan.

On Thursdays, there's a produce market, priced to accommodate people with modest means. Everyone seems conversant in notions such as pesticide-free and organic. There are classes in nutrition and cooking.

And there's Pisgah Village itself, a collection of rehabilitated bungalows and new Craftsman-style buildings, 47 homes in all in a compound full of gardens and a fountain. Once through the arched entrance, visitors see fruit trees and other food planted everywhere.

"Everything touches food, everything," said Alex Dorsey, the general manager of Equitableroots, the L.A.-based program that runs the market.

"We have a responsibility to help our communities be nourished," said Channa Grace, the executive director of Women Organizing Resources, Knowledge and Services, or WORKS. The independent nonprofit organization has developed more than 1,100 homes for people of modest means — those who earn \$23,790 to \$47,580 for a family of four in 2009, or 30% to 60% of the area's median income.

The food programs at Pisgah and at other WORKS projects are an effort to alleviate the problems of getting fresh, nutritious food, Grace said, along the lines of teaching people to fish rather than giving them one.

Finis Yoakum, a physician and faith healer who also became an early Pentecostal leader, founded a religious compound more than a century ago off what is now Avenue 60 in this northeast L.A. neighborhood. He called it Pisgah, and his vision led him to open the property to outcasts and the destitute. After his death in 1920, the houses and church on the site were used by successive Christian groups.

In 2002, Richard Kim, the son of a Pentecostal minister at the church, partnered with WORKS to renovate the property. The adjacent Christ Faith Mission church remains today.

Since Pisgah Village was completed in 2007, the cozy beige homes trimmed in brick red have received Governor's Historic Preservation and L.A. Conservancy awards, among other accolades.

But as essential as decent housing is, the developers determined, it's just the start of building a community. To make their ideas work, the pieces have to fit together.

"Even if we offer cooking classes, if people couldn't easily find healthy food, it doesn't matter," said Jolie Sheppick, development director for WORKS.

Together, the Pisgah programs that comprise the efforts to link farmers, urban agriculture, nutrition, health and community are called Earth Cultures. There's hope that eventually projects return the investment, perhaps through a line of food products made from what's grown at the community.

Last summer, Pisgah introduced a produce market that is, with the gardens, perhaps the most visible sign of the integration of food and home. It was slow going initially, taking in only \$25 or \$30.

"First, I tried to build relations with the seniors. I went door to door, to get to know them," said Mariana Negara, manager of the market and program coordinator at Pisgah.

Negara made juice from some vegetables that older residents had difficulty chewing. For a community festival, the staff made almost 300 quesadillas using kale, which went from being an unknown to a popular food.

"Word spreads," Negara said. "They would say, 'Did you try those quesadillas? Those are so good.' "

Today, the market is popular, with shoppers filling up red and green baskets with produce and often sticking around to chat or to try the bow-tie pasta with zucchini, or whatever is being made for sampling. Recipes are available in Spanish and English. The market also has about 160 subscribers for a weekly box of produce for \$15 to \$18.

No farmers work at the market. Instead, food is purchased in advance and resold by WORKS staff. Recently, Fuji apples, zucchini, oranges or peaches were selling four for \$1 for seniors, and three for \$1 for everyone else.

Dorsey negotiates prices with the farmers and queries them about their labor practices and pesticide use.

One of the challenges, she said, was to educate people about the value of food that's grown locally without chemicals, especially when they might be able to buy a sack of potatoes for 99 cents at local stores.

"We are building a trust, so that people will transfer their dollars," Dorsey said.

Maria Araujo, 79, lived in East L.A. before she moved to Pisgah. She's a fan of the market and buys kale, carrots, zucchini, onions, tomatoes and other produce, she said through an interpreter. She appreciates that the food is fresh and convenient.

There are markets at four other WORKS sites — one family housing development in Pomona and three others in Los Angeles — with plans for two more this fall. What doesn't sell goes to cooking classes or is used as snacks for WORKS programs. If there's still food left over, it gets donated. Scraps are composted to feed the gardens.

"We believe food access is going to be one of, if not the most significant, issues of our time over the next 10 years," Grace said.

Every open space at Pisgah seems to be planted, much of it with fruit trees, tomatoes, corn, green beans, garlic, onions, herbs and more. A tucked-away patch has rows of plastic pots of pepper plants. Everyone is welcome to help plant the garden boxes, and residents leave extra food out on benches for their neighbors.

Organizers also plan to have a master gardener program and to teach water and energy conservation.

"At the end of the day, it's about them being self-sufficient," said Cinthya Guillen, who runs the gardening programs.

Channa Grace has experience in being self-sufficient. As the single mother of four, she used to walk into the hills around her Los Angeles home and gather greens.

Later, she devoted her career to building housing. When a minor stroke in 2008 prompted her to slow down a little, she began to consider whether it was time to retire or time to add a new dimension to her leadership role at WORKS. She kept thinking about food.

"Let's figure out how we can use our grounds to grow food," Grace, 64, said one afternoon, sitting on a low stone wall ringing a brick courtyard.

"What if we, all of us together, worked on getting decent quality food to our people, paying farmers a living wage," Grace said. "I thought, 'I'm going to ante up for another 30 years.' "

So over nine months, she met with a consultant, Dorsey and Margarita Paiewonsky, who runs cooking programs at five WORKS sites, to design the programs.

On the first Friday of the month, residents gather in Pisgah's community room for Paiewonsky's cooking classes. What they make becomes the center of the potluck dinner.

Paiewonsky designs menus to appeal to Pisgah's cultures, using the ingredients from its produce market and gardens. A recent dinner included a Korean cucumber salad, zucchini-potato soup and rice pilaf with diced vegetables and almonds. Pieces of tilapia were marinated in Asian spices, then wrapped in corn husks, tied and grilled outside.

Frances Molina, who lives at Pisgah with her 95-year-old father, talked as she chopped vegetables.

"I've been getting to know things, trying them out," she said. "What's happened as a result I've come to realize it's more healthy to eat organic, with no chemicals."

Her father is grateful, she said, because it reminds him of the way he ate as a young man in Mexico.

Soon, neighbors trickled in for dinner, some with dishes they had made. Usually about 30 people show up, including translators for Spanish and Korean.

"The food is good, and I know the people who are there, even though there's a little language barrier," said Carolyn Gebhard, 82. "I use my hands a lot."

That's food, working its magic, Grace said. It provides an easy opportunity for people to communicate across language barriers. One evening Mike Kim, 78, told stories of his adjustment to this country after the Korean War, including his astonishment when he heard that Americans ate canines. (The dish in question: hot dogs.) At another dinner, residents realized that Mexicans and Koreans each have a rice beverage, horchata and sikhye.

Such discoveries "begin to change the conversation, because we start to understand," Grace said.

Added WORKS staff member Sheppick: "It's such a natural fit for the racial healing work we are doing. People got talking about misunderstandings."

And ideally that leads to a restorative feeling as powerful as any that Finis Yoakum's mission aimed to provide.

Check out our blog where you'll find more [pictures of Pisgah Village](#).

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