

Neighborly gardening is an attempt at gaining community cohesiveness

Editor's note:

Women's Services Inc. of Crawford County — this year celebrating its 35th anniversary of caring and healing local victims of domestic violence — is offering a series of commentaries focusing on domestic and sexual violence. These essays will describe the challenges from abuse for the Crawford County community and Women's Services Inc., and what can be done to improve the work being done here. The columns run the second Monday of each month. Reg Henry's column, which normally runs on Mondays in the Tribune, was published on Saturday.

JULIE HUNTER



friendly face is right next door or across the street. But in this age of communicating and connecting via social media, email and texting, how do we get to know our neighbors?

Women's Services has an idea on how we can get to know our neighbors. While not an

innovative or ground-breaking idea, it is an idea that does need a little resuscitating ... talking to your neighbors. Crazy, I know! In order to facilitate the get-to-know-your-neighbor conversation, it helps to have a similar vested interest, say your homes, your other neighbors, your lawn, or your GARDEN!

Women's Services wondered if the communal aspect of growing food could inspire neighbors to become more invested in each other and in their neighborhoods. Could food, as a source of life, promote goodwill and gardening, as a means of learning, promote empathy? This summer, Women's Services is endeavoring to find out.

At the beginning of summer, Women's Services, along with Allegheny College's Environmental Science Department, planted tomato, cilantro, pepper, basil, squash and cucumber plants that had been sowed from seedlings on the northeast side of The Greenhouse.

The benefits of community gardens are numerous and well documented.

They include:

- bringing about an increased sense of community stewardship
- bringing people together from a wide variety of backgrounds (age, race, culture, social class)
- stimulating social interaction
- encouraging self-reliance
- producing nutritious food
- easing family food budgets
- creating opportunities for recreation, exercise, therapy and education
- reducing and preventing crime
- utilizing unused green space

Community gardens improve neighborhood appearance, increase a sense of ownership, increase property values,

enhance social capital and neighborhood pride. In addition, the strengthened social interaction of neighbors through the garden increases the likelihood that action will be taken if something wrong is happening, rather than ignoring the event. Community gardens improve conditions in neighborhoods and cultivate the components of neighborhood crime prevention.

There are promising public health programs that are bringing together specialists in the fields of violence prevention, healthy eating and active living to inspire and engage their communities with ideas that cultivate and foster health and safety. The correlation between violence and health outcomes may not be intuitively evident, but there is an intersection between preventing violence and promoting healthy eating and active living. Science supports the connection between the physical and social environment and a range of behaviors, including violence, exercise and healthy eating. There is a budding body of science that is documenting the link between involvement with and/or exposure to violence of various sorts and an entire gamut of chronic diseases.

Women's Services' commitment to our community and neighbors is strong, and we invite our neighbors to visit us and our garden at 204 Spring St., Meadville, while also reaping the benefits of bonding and phytonutrients. Stop by and say "hi," pull a few weeds, pick up a complementary recyclable grocery bag or help us harvest the garden when our produce is prime for plucking.

Women's Services is also planning an end-of-summer "salsa-themed" block party to enjoy the fruits of our labor and to get to better know our neighbors. If you'd like to be a part of the block party planning or would like to start planning a garden for your street, just give us a call at 724-4637 or send us an email at information@womensservicesinc.org. We'd love to get to know you better and have your help in ending violence.

Hunter is marketing and media supervisor for Meadville-based Women's Services Inc.

I grew up on the west side of Cleveland in Lakewood, Ohio, with the Hughes, the Aklins, the Carletons, the Prices, the Volls, the Berrys, the Sickles, and the Brinkmans, to name a few. Not only did I know the names of my neighbors, I knew the names of their pets, their favorite TV shows and when they were having spaghetti and meatballs for dinner. Today, not so much.

Neighbors once served a vital role in terms of offering camaraderie and acting as a support system. While thanks to technology we're more connected than ever, we're also more disconnected than ever. At the rapid rate our lives are running, it becomes harder and harder to feel any sense of community.

When people feel a sense of belonging, they tend to lead happier and healthier lives, and strong communities create a more stable and supportive society that not only benefits individuals, but the community and the greater society as well. There is also a direct link between community cohesiveness and the rate of violence in that community.

By engaging our neighbors, who are typically the first to hear about domestic violence problems, we can respond and even prevent violence in our community. When we introduce ourselves to our neighbors, we break down the isolation that domestic violence survivors feel by letting them know that a