



The Problem

Vacant and abandoned lots are an eyesore in any area, but in the 53206 Milwaukee zip code that is magnified. Stereotyped as the most incarcerated and poverty stricken area in the state, the vacant lots create a haven for problems.

The Solution

We Got This, a non-profit organization, is changing the landscape by turning vacant lots in the 53206 zip code from liabilities into assets. **The group pays local youth to create gardens and green spaces in the vacant lots.** We Got This maintains 15 city lots in the zip code.

Each Saturday during the summer well over 100 youth gather at the organization's home base lot early in the morning and get their work assignments for the day. They get placed into groups and start by picking up trash. Afterward they go to their assigned garden and then come together for lunch.

We Got This bases their work with youth on four pillars: 1)

Youth empowerment, 2) Bringing resources into the neighborhood, 3) Entrepreneurship, and 4) Pride in the neighborhood. Each week a theme from one of the pillars is a focus, and the groups discuss it. Youth learn life skills like conflict resolution, leadership, and self-worth and understand that they are making a difference in their community.

We Got This is run by volunteers. "Our adult leaders live in the community so are invested in it," said Meg Bruzan, We Got This Board Member. "Adults lead our work in the gardens but also bring other talents to our efforts, like literacy, acquiring and maintaining lawn mowers, coordinating a coat drive, and making lunch."

Results

An average of 147 middle and high schoolers come out each Saturday in the summer to work in the program.

"We've seen so many positive changes in the youth we work with," Bruzan said. "Kids are proud to say 'I did this' when

walking by the beautiful gardens they had a hand in creating. We also hear that our kids are not staying up late on Friday evenings because they know they need to get to the gardens early on Saturday. And, we've heard older kids scold other kids that throw trash on the ground or who swear, saying 'we don't talk like that.' We are changing the culture these kids are exposed to."

Bruzan also shares that people driving by the working youth stop and give the adult leaders money to buy something for the kids. "Some adults have stopped to share their story with the youth," Bruzan said. "One guy told the kids how he was in jail and not to repeat his mistakes."

One story sticks with Bruzan and points to the power of a supportive adult. While walking through a garden, she saw two girls fighting. She stopped the fight and invited the girls into the garden where she had them feel the plants and talked to them about anger management. She got to know one of the girls and learned she had a hard life. At a later garden day, Bruzan saw the girls walking arm and arm. They told her they were now friends.



By tending to vacant lots in their neighborhood, children become empowered to change their life and their surroundings through We Got This in Milwaukee.