The Colorado Health Foundation™



Planting Seeds of Health in Antonito

Rural Health: Innovating Out of Necessity

The thunder of horses' hooves once filled Antonito's rodeo arena. Crowds flocked here to celebrate the heritage of the San Luis Valley, where people have farmed and ranched since the mid-1800s.

But the arena has been silent for years. Paint is peeling on the grandstand. Weeds grow undisturbed by cowboys and horses. In 2015, though, something new took root in the arena: a school garden.

The garden grows more than just lettuce and carrots for the school cafeteria. Its supporters aim to plant a lifelong connection to the outdoors for the entire community.



Abe Rosenberg, garden educator, tending to the Valleybound Antonito School and Community Garden.

“The garden project is designed to improve the quality of life and health of people in the community, focusing on the school and working our way outward from there,” said Abe Rosenberg, garden educator for Valleybound Antonito School and Community Garden.

Valleybound describes itself as “a garden, a kitchen, a playground, a classroom, a refuge, a home.”

It’s a project of the nonprofit Conejos Clean Water. The group’s executive director, Antonito native Justin Garoutte, worked with volunteers and the school district to create the garden at the rodeo arena, located on school property.

The garden just finished its second growing season and the students are getting more involved. Rosenberg started a permaculture class for middle schoolers to teach the principles of sustainable agriculture.

Valleybound also hosts outdoor education camps. Rosenberg remembers a girl who was new to town and struggling. But she blossomed during the two-week camp, left with a better feeling about herself – mentally and physically – and made a bunch of new friends along the way.

Valleywide plans to build a community center at the garden to host cooking classes, concerts and community events.

“To do a community garden is relatively simple. You just need to find a place to have it and a passionate group of people to get it started,” Rosenberg said.

But school gardens whither without sustained attention. That’s why he says it’s crucial to have a champion in the school, such as a superintendent or principal.

Like any successful garden, if it’s tended carefully, the harvest will be bountiful.

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