

# The Production Farm: Farming, Film, and Foster Care



What do foster care, film production, and farming have in common? Ask Carolyn and Wyatt Kuether. The couple, both Wisconsin natives, are busy piloting The Production Farm, a Green Bay-based program that involves teen in the foster care system in local gardening projects, and then gives them the tools and skills to create a film about the experience. The Kuethers, who have spent the past ten years producing films and television shows in New York City, come with a wealth of experience to share, and a healthy dose of passion for teaching teens new skills.

This year – the program’s first – The Production Farm’s ten students will design, construct, and plant a rooftop garden in downtown Green Bay. By the end of the semester, they will also create a reality television-style film that documents what they learned. Episodes will range from the nuts and bolts of urban garden design to questions that arise along the way, such as: “How can you use the plants you grow?” and “Does music affect plants?”

The Kuethers want to give kids the opportunity to take leadership and make decisions. Although the adults will designate each year’s garden project – which is highly dependent on community partners – students work collaboratively to decide what style of film they will produce, and how the content will be presented. Individual students are assigned responsibilities within the film-making process. Sometimes, these responsibilities help student step out of their comfort zones.

“Earlier this year we helped host a youth film festival,” Carolyn recalled, “and one girl was put in charge of sound, including conducting interviews. She was very nervous at first, but by the end of the day, she was asking everybody questions and getting them to talk. Later, her foster mom asked me, ‘How did you get her to do that? Talking to strangers is her biggest fear.’ “

“It’s neat to see what happens when you say, ‘Here, take this – you’re in charge,’



February 2016

*This story was produced by the Wisconsin School Garden Initiative, a program of Community GroundWorks. For more information, visit [www.wischoolgardens.org](http://www.wischoolgardens.org).*



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Carolyn reflected. “It empowers them, and they don’t realize they are learning.”

Teens who participate in the program continue to attend their home schools, and participate in Production Farm activities two evenings per week, plus a monthly Saturday field trip or movie day. The Production Farm works with several organizations that place foster students in enrichment programs such as theirs.

After its pilot year, The Production Farm hopes to expand to include a larger, more rural farmstead that sits directly between Green Bay, Sheboygan, and the Fox Cities. “That circle reaches twenty percent of foster teens in the state of Wisconsin,” Carolyn said. “And for those that aren’t able to travel, we will continue to maintain the rooftop site in Green Bay.”

On their dream farm, the Kuethers will utilize the land to create a large garden and greenhouse for future student projects. The barn will become a film production studio. The Kuethers, currently in the application process to become foster parents themselves, will also be able to welcome up to ten teens to live on site in the large farmhouse. A smaller guesthouse will become a transitional home for up to six 18-25 year olds. “We want to teach them that life is more than just biology,” Carolyn said, “—your family can become where you live.”

The Production Farm was started as a grassroots movement – relying primarily on donations of money and supplies from like-minded people and businesses. The program continues to seek donations – and this summer, will be taking on a fleet of volunteers – as they work to grow their program and give ever more teens the opportunity to produce a garden, a movie, and a sense of community.

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