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National community garden conference features local presenter



Pittsburg resident and American Community Gardening Association conference presenter Matt O'Malley is shown here with ACGA President Cathy Walker at the recent conference in New Orleans.
COURTESY PHOTO

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PITTSBURG, Kan. — Hundreds of gardeners, advocates, and community members from across the U.S. gather each year for the American Community Gardening Association's national conference. This year's event was themed "Rooted in Green Community" and took place on the campus of Loyola University in New Orleans from Oct. 6 to 9.

The conference featured 34 workshops, each addressing one of four topic areas: horticulture and soil, social justice and food access, community engagement, or community garden management. Presenters from across the country were invited to share their areas of expertise. The workshop subjects included everything from volunteer management to compost, bees and insects, food forests and community orchards, school and military gardens, food waste and recovery, vertical and indoor gardens, funding and sustainability, soil health, native plants, global perspectives of community gardening, and more.

Pittsburg resident Matt O'Malley, who works as the director of outreach and development at Live Well Crawford County and as a program assistant for the Kansas Food Action Network, was one of the presenters at this year's conference. His presentation entitled "Mobilizing Ordinary People to do Extraordinary Things" centered around the work he led as part of Live Well's Healthy Communities Initiative, a grant from the Kansas Health Foundation. This initiative established the Arma Nutrition Council and its various food access projects, most notably the Arma Community Garden. The goal of his workshop was to teach participants how to engage communities in ways that promote conversation and that encourage participation and input from people of all backgrounds.

The workshop O'Malley facilitated was different than most in that it did not necessarily involve lessons about how to take care of a garden. Rather, he shared about the steps to be taken before anyone ever sews a seed.

"Authentically engaging community members is tricky work. So, whenever agencies gather people to plan projects, they tend to call in the experts that know the data and the content. In our work in Arma, we wanted to hear from the context experts, the very people whose lives are most affected by a lack of fresh, healthy, foods," O'Malley said. "Not only are those the people who best understand their own barriers to food access, but they are the ones most capable of showing leadership by dreaming up and taking the lead on unique solutions to address the inequities they are facing."

Over 80 people attended Community Conversations in Arma during Live Well's engagement phase, during which the residents voted to start a community garden, raised \$9,000 in less than a month, and set up a team of leaders to oversee the project. This initiative also expanded the student food pantry at Northeast High School, established a new community-wide pantry at the Arma City Library, arranged meal deliveries from The Lord's Diner in Pittsburg, nutrition classes from K-State Research and Extension, SNAP application training from Kansas Appleseed, and led to the library becoming a commodities food distribution site in partnership with the Salvation Army. The garden, located at McDonald Park on East Washington Street in Arma, grows 2,000 pounds of food per year, the majority of which is distributed for free through the library food pantry. According to O'Malley, interested volunteers or groups who would like to offer support can contact the Arma City Library to find out how they can help feed Arma.

"About 40 people attended my workshop," said O'Malley. "People of all ages, ethnicities, backgrounds, and experiences. I am grateful for the opportunity to present the work we did in Arma on a national stage, and hope it helps other communities across the nation make progress on engaging people to improve food systems."