

Ophelia's Blue Vine Farm Receives Grant to Continue Bringing Life Back to Urban Soil

By Jazzlyn Johnson
The Community Voice

Ophelia Woodard Richardson was an experienced farmer who grew up on a share-cropping family farm in Arkansas. They grew everything from okra, to cantaloupe and kale. It's a skill she passed down to her grandson, Mike Rollen.

About seven years ago, led by his grandmother's spirit, Rollen got back into farming. He particularly wanted his children to have the same farming experience he grew up with. He started Ophelia's Blue Vine.

"I really wanted them to experience what real food tastes like – real apples, real tomatoes," Rollen said. He also wanted to bring fresh food and green spaces to the Kansas City urban core. "People need green spaces and people need to eat, but we also need to preserve the trees and the ecosystem."

For a while, Rollen and his sons were regulars, selling veggies like kale, collard greens and herbs at the Ivanhoe Farmers Market. The pandemic created some struggle, but thanks to a \$25,000 grant from Generating Income for Tomorrow (GIFT), a nonprofit dedicated to ending systemic racism through funding Black-owned businesses in the urban core, Rollen has funding to address some of the organization's needs.

GIFT FUNDING

GIFT was founded out of frustration of the lack of support for small, Black-owned businesses, by Christopher Stewart. A member of a 15,000 member Facebook group for Kansas City Black-owned business, he put forth a reasonable economic

empowerment idea to the group.

"If all of us gave \$10 a month, that's \$150,000 a month. That's \$1.8 million a year," Stewart said. "That's

their second is \$500,000 in donations.

Ophelia's grant will allow them to increase their yield and continue to

vacant property with environmental contamination that could pose health risks. The city has a loan and grant program for those who want to remediate

the plots. Rollen received \$30,000 in grant funding.

Rollen and soil experts spent a challenging three years completely transforming the dirt to begin growing food.

"You can get fresh dirt brought in and that's the most immediate way to fix soil, but that doesn't bring life to the soil," Rollen said. "The challenge is bringing the life back to the soil."

Rollen duplicated what you would find in nature, and created a forest-floor-like soil, charged with a strong fungal community and microscopic organisms.

"That's the trick to transform dirt to soil," he said.

He said that inoculating the soil with a strong mushroom spawn really transformed it. They also introduced some aggressive worms that thrive on leaves and reproduce at a high rate, which brought more worms, birds and other wildlife.

"It just brings all that life back to the area," he said. "In

nature, it would probably take 40 years, but we did it in three years."

Now, Rollen says it's some of the best soil in Kansas City, where he takes pride in producing the best fresh herbs year-round. Because Ophelia's has a refrigerator in the greenhouse, their herbs are the freshest you can get and have a longer shelf life.

IMPACT OF THE \$25K GIFT GRANT

Because Ophelia's grows food all year-round, they use a stove to heat the greenhouse in winter, but it doesn't put out quite enough heat for the size of the greenhouse. The GIFT grant will help Ophelia's purchase a commercial stove that can put out four times the heat more efficiently.

The grant will also help them purchase a storage container for tools and an RV with a refrigerator and restrooms that they can pull to other sites.

Rollen also plans to transform the space behind the greenhouse to have a chef-demonstration kitchen and an entertainment space for poetry and movie nights.

"I'm fighting for this area because I see so much potential – I've been working on this for half a decade and eventually it will be a really cool space," Rollen said.

GIFT is always taking applications for Black-owned businesses. Apply at www.kansascitygift.org/get-funded.

To help support other Black-owned businesses in the inner-city, donate through GIFT at www.kansascitygift.org. ●●

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PHOTO: Mike Rollen, is the recent recipient of the Generating Income for Tomorrow grant for KC urban core businesses. Rollen, the founder of Ophelia's Blue Vine, checks the soil in his greenhouse, located at 24th and Vine. Working with his sons, they sell fresh herbs at the Ivanhoe Market.

more than enough money for us to start up a number of Black-owned businesses right here in our own community. We don't need a bank. We can control our own, you know, we just need to come together and do it."

That's exactly what Stewart did with the help of his friend Brandon Calloway. Nearing the end of their first year, GIFT has raised more than \$300,000 in donations and has awarded \$125,000 in grants to businesses including KC Cajun food truck, Ruby Jean's Juicery, K.C. Maintenance and Remodeling and more. Their fundraising goal for

make an impact on those living in food deserts in Kansas City.

FROM DIRT TO SOIL IN THE JAZZ DISTRICT

Rollen, who began by renting plots at community gardens, received a grant from the city to clean-up a plot in the Jazz District. The soil on the plot, located on 24th and Vine, had a lot of problems with glass, aluminum, metals and lead," Rollen said. "There's also very hard clay which is hard for the plant's roots to penetrate, so they just sit there and the trees usually don't grow."

The lot was deemed a "Brown-fields site" by the city, which is a

ZERO from page 19

ized. Twenty-one is obviously not zero. Vaccines are almost never perfect. But the Covid vaccines are turning it into the sort of risk that people accept every day.

Israel's numbers: Only 3.5 out of every 100,000 people vaccinated there were later hospitalized with Covid symptoms. During a typical flu season in the U.S., by comparison, roughly 150 out of every 100,000 people are

hospitalized with flu symptoms.

And yet the seasonal flu does not grind life to a halt. It does not keep people from flying on airplanes, eating in restaurants, visiting their friends or going to school and work.

The vaccines will not produce "Covid zero." But they are on pace — eventually, and perhaps even by summer — to produce something that looks a lot like normalcy. The rare exceptions won't change that, no matter how much attention they receive. ●●