

Dana Harris-Yates will direct a new farm site in Homewood, organized by the Black Urban Gardeners and Farmers Cooperative. (Photo: Virginia Alvino Young / 90.5 WESA)

BLACK URBAN GARDENERS BRING HEALING TO HOMEWOOD

VIRGINIA ALVINO YOUNG ([HTTPS://WWW.ALLEGHENYFRONT.ORG/AUTHOR/VIRGINIA-ALVINO-YOUNG/](https://www.alleghenyfront.org/author/virginia-alvino-young/)) × JANUARY 5, 2018

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This story was originally published on June 30, 2017.

A block down from Westinghouse High School in Pittsburgh's Homewood neighborhood sits an overgrown vacant lot. It's the future farm site of BUGS – [The Black Urban Gardeners and Farmers' Cooperative](https://www.facebook.com/Black-Urban-Gardeners-and-Farmers-of-Pittsburgh-Co-op-1759113421021161/) (<https://www.facebook.com/Black-Urban-Gardeners-and-Farmers-of-Pittsburgh-Co-op-1759113421021161/>).

Dana Harris-Yates will be directing the farm, and guiding young gardeners from Westinghouse. They'll get exercise, and learn more about growing fresh food. But this space is as much about mental healing as it is about physical healing.

In addition to things like yoga and meditation, Harris-Yates is bringing what's called care farming to the space. Its benefits are two-fold. First, the simple act of working in the soil.

"Because when one is nurturing that plant, they're nurturing themselves," she says.

But they'll also grow a variety of herbs and plants to consume for natural healing, which Harris-Yates says can address a variety of conditions, like post-traumatic stress, depression, and anxiety.

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Some studies (https://depts.washington.edu/hhwb/Thm_Mental.html) have suggested that simply being around green space can improve a community’s health.

Harris-Yates says the farm’s amenities can be especially beneficial in Homewood, which is predominantly African American and low-income. Harris-Yates and a number of other residents say there are a lot of positive things happening in Homewood, like the gardens, but the neighborhood often receives attention for its crime rate.

Harris-Yates says that crime often impacts “children, who in this community have experienced a lot of death, a lot of trauma from various reasons, different home situations that may cause them to have stress. ”

Despite the need for mental health care, she said many African Americans are resistant to taking prescription medications, and there are other barriers to Western health care.

“If you don’t have insurance of course that’s always a lack of access,” she says. “If you don’t have transportation to get different places, that’s an issue. If you don’t see people that look like you, and they’re attempting to help you with mental health issues, that’s a barrier.”

She takes a more tribal approach to care. Her methodology is rooted in her background in Western psychology. But she also practices reiki, or energy healing, and is the medicine woman of her Native American tribe. Her business, Cultural Oasis, sells things like herbal treatments, especially to the African American members of her community.

“We’ve never really wanted to go outside of our community to seek mental health,” she says. “And that might be a problem in some aspects. So what I decided to do was keep what made them feel comfortable. They used to go to their shaman....they used to go to their pastor. That’s where they went to for therapy and counseling.”

There’s a history of challenges for African Americans working to take care of their community, including farmers, according to Raqueeb Bey, the founder of BUGS

"This is nothing new," she says. "After slavery, a lot of our ancestors who were sharecropping would have their crops burned down by the Klan, so they started farmers associations."

She said contemporary Pittsburgh farmers face their own set of challenges.

"As black gardeners and farmers we needed to come together to work together, to share work days for sweat equity. We found that in Pittsburgh, a lot of us weren't sitting at the table who were black, and we needed to fight institutionalized racism that exists even in urban agriculture," she says.

Last June, her organization started a farmers market in Homewood featuring a number of regional growers. That'll expand with an indoor market in the fall. They're adding a market in Uptown this year, too.

Dana Haris-Yates is excited that in addition to locally-grown produce, she and her students can provide the community with medicinal herbs and plants.

Beyond the specific plants, Harris-Yates said healing begins with a connection to the soil, which she wants all of Homewood to experience.

"We play in dirt and we teach children how to play in dirt, and we teach adults how to play in dirt," she says. "It's not going to kill you, you can always wash your hands."

This October, Bugs will start building hoop houses on their farm site. The raised beds and composting heat will allow them to grow herbs and produce year-round.

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