Planty for the People: A Community-Based Participatory Research Approach to Healthy, Plant-Based Food Access in the Border Region

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PLANTY FOR THE PEOPLE: A COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH APPROACH TO HEALTHY, PLANT-BASED FOOD ACCESS IN THE BORDER REGION

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PLANTY FOR THE PEOPLE: A COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH APPROACH TO HEALTHY, PLANT-BASED FOOD ACCESS IN THE BORDER REGION

by

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have made volunteering at Planty for the People, especially everyone who took the time to participate in this study.
ABSTRACT

Access to food is an issue for many across the U.S., especially in low-income and high minority areas (Gallinar, et al., 2017). The border region of El Paso, Texas has several designated areas without access to supermarkets where residents may purchase food within a walking or short driving distance (HFAC, 2010). Researchers have linked food insecurity to nutritionally inadequate diets, which are shown to lead to obesity or other disorders like heart disease, diabetes, etc. (Marks, 2015; Craig and Mangels, 2009; Bartolotto, 2013). Food insecurity leads to an array of issues down the line that negatively affects not only health but socioeconomic status as well, and since food is essential to being human, the lack of access to it is an issue of social justice. A local cafe, One Grub Community, and their sister non-profit organization, Planty for the People, are fighting this food-related injustice and has built its community on urban gardening, community engagement through volunteerism, and plant-based food access within the border region. Through an Urban Political Ecology (UPE) perspective, the author argues that this three-pronged approach to food access is a unique, innovative, and efficient strategy to help people gain more access to fresh fruits and vegetables. This mixed-methods research documents the contributions and impact of the One Grub Community cafe and organization to the local community through surveys, interviews, content analysis, and participatory research. The community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach provides in-depth insights into the author’s experience volunteering in the garden and working with One Grub Community owners/administrators in community outreach efforts and applied for administrative work. The documentation of this three-prong strategy against food insecurity has the potential to teach great lessons of local efforts to address food insecurity how to respond to unforeseen obstacles, such as pandemics, when serving vulnerable populations. This research
shows a multidimensional, social entrepreneurial model has the power to provide success in both business ventures and social justice, with the help of other community organization working toward food justice. It also shows how community gardens and food sovereignty initiatives have wide ranges of benefits for many kinds of people and provides further explanation on how food venues that support food access can become local hubs that help to cultivate a community of care, wellbeing, healing, education through many avenues, and commensality, thereby empowering the people of this community. The challenges that this organization deals with are detailed in this research as well, which include a lack of in-depth discussion of healthy habits and diets, and difficulty helping those who are afraid to ask for help or who are not aware of their programs.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Walking into One Grub Community cafe, you feel a warmness in the air as the scents of the week’s food waft towards you. Visitors usually hear a friendly greeting like “hey, friend!” coming from the counter. It is reminiscent of how you might feel in school walking into an ideal, best-case scenario cafeteria and seeing your acquaintances while your group of friends calls you over to them; it is familiar, comforting, and smells like heaven. You get to the counter and start to look over the weekly menu, but you cannot choose because it all sounds delicious; the chilaquiles with mole sound amazing, but the pancakes are so fluffy and the fresh fruit and whipped cream on top are tempting. You think, ‘maybe I should get the Hawaiian burger and oven fries or some desebrada tacos; either way, the food is made with the intention to feed our community whether we have the money or not, and it is all mindfully crafted with only plant-based ingredients. At the counter, you usually will see Roman, the head chef and co-founder of One Grub Community (OGC) and he will always make it a point to ask you how or where you have been. Roman heads One Grub restaurant, while his wife Adriana, leads Planty for the People, the non-profit organization that runs a community garden right next to the restaurant. Volunteers who work on the garden get a free meal at the One Grub restaurant. Both Roman and Adriana have built relationships with volunteers and customers over 4 years since they began operating as a joint business and non-profit organization. They keep up with them through Garden Days, the Wednesday morning that people can volunteer in the garden in exchange for a free meal from OGC, through social media, or through their interactions at the cafe. Where market transactions tend to be anonymous, the One Grub experience hardly ever is; rather, it is a place where community is built and fostered.
On their counter, you will find local sweet, plant-based treats like doughnuts and cake from Sane Vegan Treats, a local business, fliers to the various events that would be offered every week by both OGC and other local organizations and restaurants. After browsing through them and picking up a flier for Thursday donate-what-you-can yoga, you walk over to the drink station and choose from the day’s *aguapresca* filled with fresh fruit and herbs from the garden, a cup of hot coffee, or water. Then you make your way over to a table that has a beautiful arrangement of flowers from the garden, which in the summer typically means vibrant sunflowers, zinnias, perhaps a sprig of mint. You wait for your food and watch as people come and go, no one without a hello or goodbye from at least Roman and Adriana. After a few minutes, your food is brought out to you and your One Grub experience takes off as you take the first bite. The flavors are so carefully crafted, the textures of the dishes marry together perfectly, each few bites washed down with the watermelon mint infused water.

Roman comes by as he is picking up plates and asks what you think of the food, but you are usually too in awe that plants can taste so delectably to even formulate a coherent response. If it is your first time, you might take a tour of the garden and be tempted by its beauty to volunteer, whether it is because you have always wanted to learn how to garden, you want to meet new people, teach your little ones how to garden, spend some therapeutic time destressing under the leaves of fruit trees and with your hands connecting to the earth -- or perhaps you are motivated by the free meal in return for your efforts. This ‘pay it forward’ meal is a part of Planty for the People’s programming crafted by Romana and Adriana to make sure that people who are struggling with food access have a secure, nourishing meal available to them when they need it.

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This meal people receive for volunteering in the garden is the saving grace of many individuals in this border region of El Paso, Texas where access to any food is a challenge for many. A special report by The Food Trust and Paso Del Norte Institute for Healthy Living published in 2017 found “more than 160,000 El Paso County residents, including 52,000 children live in lower-income communities with limited supermarket access” (Gallinar, Lang, Manon, Ramos, Redelfs, Whigham, and Young 2017, p. 3). Food insecurity, which the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines as a lack of consistent access to enough food for a healthy, active life, has many structural causes and determinants that unsurprisingly go hand in hand with many social issues that affect this community, including economic stability, education, health and health care, neighborhood and built environment (including public and private transportation), and social and community context (Healthy People 2020).

Many studies of food insecurity conducted in the City of El Paso and in surrounding colonias, or unincorporated neighborhoods where a high percentage of authorized or unauthorized immigrants often reside, have focused on this topic as it is related to healthcare (Heyman, Nunez-Mchiri, and Talavera 2009), children’s health (Dean, Johnson, Nalty, and Sharkey 2012), geographic distance and built environment in colonias (Nunez-Mchiri, Riviera, and Marrufo 2017), and a highly polluted environment (Beverland 2014; Darby 2012). Additionally, 1 in every 5 El Pasoans are in poverty - 20.7% as opposed to the national average 14%, and the average per capita income from 2014-2018 was $20,763 compared to the national average of $32,671 (United States Census Bureau 2020).

Put in simple terms, food insecurity is determined by the degree of food access and measured on a larger scale by food deserts, or geographic areas where individuals’ access to affordable, healthy food options is either restricted or nonexistent because of the lack of grocery
stores they can conveniently travel to. In urban areas, the USDA narrowly defines a food desert as a low-income census tract that is at least 0.5 miles from a large grocery store (USDA). Gallinar et al., (2017) shows various El Paso zip codes including the one in which One Grub Community services. This study found that residents live in low-income households on average, and simultaneously have below-average supermarket sales and supermarkets as indicated in Figure 1 (below), which are markers often used to gauge food insecurity urban and rural areas. The zip code and census tract in which One Grub Community services are considered a food desert by USDA definitions.

Figure 1: Map of El Paso Supermarkets & Income; Arrow points to food desert where OGC is located (Gallinar et al., 2017) (HFAC, 2010)
This evident inequality is clearly a major problem for this population whose limited access to food may be a direct cause of disease, while facing the issue of limited access to healthcare due to El Paso’s geographic circumstance as a border community with a larger percentage of immigrants (US Census; Heyman et al., 2009). Disease is in fact a consequence of food insecurity in these communities. Additionally, food insecurity has been associated with a higher risk of being overweight or obese (Holden & Taylor, 2015), developing diabetes (Mayo Clinic 2011) having chronic disease, and mental health disorders (Healthy People 2020).

**Why Plant-Based Matters**

The cultivation of health especially is exceedingly important for those that belong to a community that unfortunately already deals with other related human rights issues (Craig and Mangels 2009). One Grub Community and Planty for the People promote the importance of consuming a plant-based diet as an alternative that could help provide a solution to food insecurity in El Paso. Plant-based diets offer sustainability, environmental, health, and socioeconomic benefits in that it can be very low-cost (with the avoidance of specialty foods) (Craig and Mangels 2009; Beverland 2014). These organizations work to provide healthier options through plant-based meals, that promote native foods of our region, and promote the incorporation of more fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, legumes, and healthy fats, into our diets without it being a task that drains our mental energy or is unaffordable.

These changes have helped many people heal and even minor changes can ripple out in positive effects. One Grub Community’s menu is 100% plant-based, and it provides the taste and culture that the Bordertown is used too, with authentic Mexican meals like tacos, enchiladas, and chilaquiles with a lot less of the fat than when prepared in the traditional way. Their menu revolves weekly with a few staples so patrons can enjoy foods from other cuisines as well, like
Mediterranean week, or BBQ week, which in turn provides access to cultural foods that people in El Paso may miss if they are not originally from this area and those who eat plant-based and want to enjoy culturally appropriate meals without animal products, whether for their health, the environment, for moral reasons or all the above. More on the benefits and importance of plant-based diets will be discussed in Chapters 3 and 5.

**An Uplifting Response to a Heavy Problem**

The issue of food insecurity is complex and has dire consequences that can weigh heavy on our minds and hearts, and yet this problem is often met with solutions and help that can be fruitful and invigorating help to the community. As this study explores in more depth in chapter 5, community gardens have long been a way that humans have combated food insecurity and have additional healing properties that benefit those who go to one. Additionally, community hubs that provide gardening education, volunteer opportunities, companionship, local produce, healthy and delicious plant-based meals, and even free food in return for volunteerism cultivate the opposite of what the consequences and causes of food insecurity involve. Community gardens promote and cultivate relaxation, genuine human connection, increased consumption of fruits and veggies, a connection to nature, health benefits, social networks, and education for people of all ages (Dyg, Christensen, and Peterson 2019; Kingsley 2009; Carney, Hamada, Rdesinski, Sprager, Nichols, and Liu 2012). I argue that One Grub Community and Planty for the People’s work accomplishes all the above by working towards food justice, a movement that works towards the equitable distribution of food access [given that poverty contributes a disproportionate burden on low income and people of color (Alkon 2016)] and focuses on developing alternative food practice as well as social activism (Glennie and Alkon 2018). There are many different community hubs that I will discuss in the next chapter that offer one or a few
of these programs or assets which will be discussed in chapter 2, but the bulk of this study will focus on the research questions detailed below.

**Research Question**

How does the One Grub Community/Planty for the People address issues of food insecurity in central El Paso, Texas? Additionally, what motivates volunteers to participate in One Grub's efforts? What are the outcomes of volunteering with this organization? What draws customers to the One Grub restaurant? How is One Grub collaborating with other local community gardens to address broader issues of food insecurity in the El Paso del Norte border region? Who are the stakeholders of the organization (i.e., customers, garden volunteers, produce box beneficiaries, community event participants) and how do they work together to address issues of food insecurity and social justice in our border region?

**Research Design**

My research will provide 1) an organizational analysis of One Grub Community and will discuss this organization addresses key issues such as food insecurity, food deserts on the US-Mexico border through a sociological and anthropological perspective; 2) a review of the literature on the benefits of volunteerism, community-engaged research, and arguments supporting plant-based diets in urban centers; 3) ethnographic portraits including my own participatory research of OGC and Planty for the People organization and the key people running the organization, volunteering, and benefitting from their efforts; and 4) interviews and online surveys for customers and volunteers to document the impact of the One Grub organization on their diets and overall well-being.

The organizational analysis will document how individuals within the organization influence their community by providing plant-based foods and access to an urban garden in an
area of El Paso that has limited access to supermarkets. My analysis also compares my immersive first-person experiences as a volunteer in their garden during the first half of my research, and the socially distanced latter half of my research due to the COVID-19 pandemic. My goal is to document the organizations’ strategies, best practices, and current challenges to share their model with other communities seeking to address food insecurity. My approach provides a mixed methods approach that incorporates both ethnographic research in the form of CBPR and survey research. I have previously built rapport as a volunteer with the organization, and this evolved into a community partner relationship with the founders in which I assist Planty for the People with administrative tasks, such as marketing, grant writing, and planning. My methodology will be expanded upon in Chapter 4.

**Relevance and Contributions of the Study**

This study builds on work by Gallinar et al. (2017) and Sharkey, Nalty, Johnson, and Dean (2012) addressing food insecurity in the border region by providing an ethnographic analysis of local efforts to promote urban gardening, community engagement through volunteerism, and a local plant-based food movement in El Paso, TX. This work contributes to the literature on Community based participatory research and sociology on the U.S.-Mexico border given my participation as a volunteer in the organization. Among the tasks I worked on were social media marketing, event planning and promotion, gardening, and grant-writing. I argue that One Grub Community’s diverse approach to food distribution provides a unique, innovative, and efficient strategy in helping people address their basic needs. Also, though research on community gardens has been conducted in other larger urban cities (Adevi and Mårtensson 2013; Armstrong 2000; Carney et al., 2012), there has not been work that provides an organizational analysis of a
multidimensional pay-it-forward cafe in a food desert along the U.S.-Mexico border. My work will address this gap in the literature.

Both academically and socially, CBPR allows for university and academic partnerships that focus efforts on generating solutions to problems rather than simply explaining or providing further evidence that an issue exists. My mixed methods approach based on community-based participatory research, along with an Urban Political Ecology (UPE) approach (Agyeman & McEntee, 2014), seeks to incorporate cases of food insecurity that are tied to the origins and development of the One Grub Community organization in providing food access in the border region. In this work, I present an organizational analysis of an effort of social entrepreneurship that was created as a response to the local food desert and related issues. Other knowledge bases that this research will contribute to include community-based participatory research as a research method, CBPR and community activities during a pandemic, outcomes of volunteerism, urban community gardening, and the benefits of plant-based foods.

This study seeks to contribute to both academic and applied efforts to address food insecurity by sharing strategies that help promote feeding, educating, and empowering the people to transform our food system. A history of how the owners of One Grub started is provided in this research with details on how they are keeping the organization going, what they have planned, and how people in the community, and other organizations, have been benefiting from their efforts. In collaboration with the One Grub organization and with qualitative research methods, I seek to include the voices and experiences of volunteers, founders, and guests. This work includes a multimedia presentation to accompany this thesis to share this research with the community. Additionally, challenges this organization faces and recommendations for how to
combat them are discussed in Chapter 6; this is an important section as it highlights the effort that is needed for such community-based projects and organizations.

It is important to note that this research makes use of standpoint theory as an epistemological approach that asserts that individual perspectives and experiences hold value as ways of acquiring knowledge. Consequently, much of this work will reflect first-person description and explanation of experiences as an academic, community partner with the organization and café.

**Summary**

So far, I have provided a background on the issue of food access in El Paso, along with background information regarding an organization and small business that has made it their mission to be active in the fight to provide food to a population that is in need. By focusing on the organization’s history, mission, vision, and current initiatives, we can assess these strategic efforts to address food insecurity in El Paso. The goal of this community-based research is to work with the organization to identify best practices and current challenges to continue to serve the El Paso community. This study documents One Grub’s effort to generate local solutions to food insecurity in the border and in the United States, and how the volunteers, customers, and other organizations work together to educating the public about the benefits of plant-based diets, and empowering consumers to make healthier choices, as well as how the organization responds to and is transformed by the need to reach the community during the challenging time of the COVID-19 pandemic.
CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

This chapter serves to conceptualize this research and provide a background that includes other local organizations that are working towards food justice through similar strategies as One Grub Community and Planty for the People. The next section will describe the attributes and demographics of the food desert that OGC is situated in. The final section will outline the history and origination of One Grub Community and the journey that founders/owners Roman and Adriana Wilcox took to get to where they currently are.

Local Community Efforts

One Grub Community and Planty for the People are not alone in their efforts to combat food insecurity or further the plant-based movement. Various organizations in the El Paso metroplex, including OGC and Planty for the People, work to bring food access, education, and health in their respective areas. One of these business organizations that is also tied to a non-profit organization in El Paso is Cafe Mayapan, a non-profit kitchen with a community garden started by a local independent organization called La Mujer Obrera. La Mujer Obrera functions as a resistance to the marginalization of women workers of Mexican heritage, and values ancestral knowledge and earth-based cultural practices such as gardening. Cafe Mayapan was established in 2001 as a social enterprise of La Mujer Obrera; the cafe not only provides plant-based options and traditional Mexican cuisine that is based on respect for Mexican ancestors and foods that are staples to the land, but it also functions as an employee training center and offers community cooking classes to help empower the community of El Paso.

La Semilla is a non-profit organization that operates in El Paso and New Mexico and is also oriented around food justice goals. Specifically, La Semilla is devoted to a healthier food system here in the Paso del Norte Region through a community garden, youth development, and
food system education efforts. The organization is home to a 14-acre farm in Anthony, New Mexico which is between El Paso and Las Cruces that helps to educate elementary and middle school students on how to grow and cook their own food. Additionally, the organization has a program that focuses on local policy that addresses the root causes of hunger and inequitable food access, and community development that fosters the growth of activists and advocates for the solution of this issue. They often work together with other organizations like Planty for the People and Mesilla Valley Food Policy Council, an organization that focuses solely on food access policy. The Anthony Youth Farm is in the same location as La Semilla, however, they focus on giving leadership opportunities and education to the local youth. Their expertise ranges from farming and food to business practices and they are looking to expand their mentorship abilities to include a program that will help young adults finish high school strong and transition to college.

Another El Paso non-profit organization that, like Planty for the People, is dedicated to healthy food access is Desert Spoon Food Hub. This organization serves as a middleman in the food system of El Paso that supports small and middle-sized farms. Their focus is on both nutritional quality and socio-economic impacts of their business and acknowledge the health impacts of food insecurity and malnutrition. Their service includes the coordination of locally and regionally sourced foods through fair market channels, creating networks between local farmers, consumers, and wholesale buyers while incorporating community education and engagement where possible.

Grown Together Meals is a for-profit business; however, they do their part in helping El Paso’s most vulnerable access fresh, healthy, plant-based meals. Grown Together Meals is one of the first businesses in El Paso to offer plant-based meal preps with a focus on healthy, whole-
plant foods that are hardly ever fried, have sufficient protein, and are not excessive in fats or carbohydrates in their prepared meals. The meal-prep service also contributes to feeding El Paso homeless individuals and migrants seeking a better life by producing meals full of vibrant vegetables, fruits, grains, and legumes to organizations that help these marginalized individuals. After operating as a home business for a few years, they have expanded into a restaurant and are looking forward to continuing not only providing healthy meal-prepped plant-based meals but feeding the community *pro-bono* as well.

There are a few organizations that are on the margins or *colonias* of El Paso, one of which is another non-profit organization, Project Ayuda. This organization is in San Elizario, TX, a town that is on the margins of El Paso, only about 10 minutes outside the city. Their headquarters looks like just another house in a *colonia*, but when you venture inside, you will be greeted by a vast space dedicated to community assistance, especially by empowering and providing resources for those who are applying for citizenship. They have a commercial kitchen that allows individuals to cook their foods that will be sold at a kitchen that again meets commercial standards, a studio where the community can benefit from free fitness classes, computers center, and even a community garden that they maintain and have community events with foods from the garden.

A second organization that is in *colonias* near El Paso is called Chucotown, and is a non-profit family farm in Socorro, TX. Started to reclaim their food and decrease food allergies, as of 2020 they have a high tunnel (as structure similar to a greenhouse but with air ventilation), help the surrounding community grow their own food, and are currently working on implementing a more formal community education program revolving around growing your own food and reclaiming our food system. The founder, Jonathan Grijalva, spoke to News Break in
2020 about his passion for gardening that evolved from a need for food sovereignty and a motivation of inspiring to seek the same sovereignty.

As a result of local activists and organizers, the city of El Paso also has established community gardens in different underserved locations across the town. The latest community garden is at the Chamizal, a lower-income neighborhood along the southern border. The garden began as an empty lot that was initially transformed into a garden in 2015 and has since provided garden plots for the rest of the community. Bowie High School is likewise in a low-income neighborhood of El Paso that has also been able to incorporate a garden into their curriculum. With the help of Texas, A&M AgriLife Extension, students could grow, cook, and eventually were able to sell their own food; their garden program has reaped great benefits for students. They are unfortunately not currently operating due to concerns around the Coronavirus pandemic, but they hope to revamp the garden and continue operations as soon as they are able.

**Origins of One Grub Community**

One Grub Community started in 2016 as a popular food truck in the Bordertown of El Paso, Texas, and has transformed into a community hub that fosters education, food sovereignty, and food access with the help of their 52-bed community garden (see Figure 2 below). The owners, Roman, and Adriana Wilcox, originally set up the food truck at a downtown art and farmers market and local events and had a reputation for selling out in a matter of hours due to their delicious plant-based menu prepared by their head chef - Roman himself. Roman had built a career in culinary arts, his life-long passion, and was at a point where he wanted to start using this passion in a more purposeful and meaningful way that included being alongside Adriana, who is the brains and focus behind many of their programs and management. Inspired by Denise Cerreta, who started the pay-it-forward and non-profit ‘*One World Everybody Eats,*’ they
decided to implement the new charitable system in their food truck business, which eventually continued to their 3000 square feet brick and mortar cafe and home of their organization and garden.

In 2019, they began their transition to the brick-and-mortar cafe, Roman and Adriana decided to start Planty for the People, a 501(c)3 non-profit organization that would be sponsored by One Grub Community and would operate on the same pay-it-forward principles they had since their food truck era. The non-profit would incorporate their newly gained garden beds, a volunteer program, and an educational component with the goal of empowering and engaging the community by providing events and courses around the topics of gardening, growing your own food, and health and wellness.

In addition to feeding the community, the Planty for the People program is educating the community on the strategies of urban gardening in a desert climate, through the organizations’
partnership with a local business owner and horticulturist, Estela Flores. As previously mentioned, a goal of this program, besides providing immediate food access for those who are in need is to educate the volunteers about gardening so that they can grow their own food and take back control of their food system. Estela aids in this process by sharing her knowledge of gardening and leading garden days by delegating all the maintenance activities and providing short lessons every week (i.e., how to compost, propagating, upcycling, etc.) depending on the season, the month, or whatever is going on that week.

The socioeconomic context of the immediate area, about a 1-mile radius from where the organization and cafe are located, illustrates just how necessary their healthy food access initiatives are in this area. The zip code it is in, 79902, is a lower-middle-class neighborhood that, like the city of El Paso, is composed of over 80% Hispanic individuals. Breaking down the zip code even further will reveal that there are socioeconomic inequities within it. There are neighborhoods like Kern Place in this zip code, a neighborhood up the street and mountain from where One Grub Community is in that has generally higher income and transportation rates, while UTEP and the one-mile radius surrounding OGC are much more at risk for food insecurity. The USDA’s food desert research atlas provides a mapping tool that helps locate food desert indicators like low supermarket access and low income and proves that concern for food access in this area is valid (see Figure 3 below) (Rhone 2020). The streets surrounding OGC are orange signifying a low-income census tract where a sizable number of residents have low income and are more than half a mile from a supermarket. According to the USDA, this constitutes a food desert. One mile to the west is the University of Texas at El Paso highlighted in green, meaning residents here are low income and more than a mile from a supermarket, posing an even greater risk of food insecurity.
As we can see, immediate blocks surrounding the cafe are among an even lower-income sector of the zip code which is evident in the lack of businesses, restaurants, or grocery stores in these blocks. Instead, “bodega”-type establishments are present throughout the neighborhood but only provide ‘convenient’ gas-station food, beer, and some packaged and heavily processed food. Many people in this area lack transportation, which adds another obstacle for residents that do lack access to fresh, nutritionally adequate foods. Additionally, the zip code is also home to the University of Texas at El Paso, so many students can walk or bike to the OGC locale and benefit from our programs since students are often in need of food security as well. Planty for the People seek to help the most marginalized individuals no matter what stage of their life they
may be in through their proposed projects, which would make a significant difference both in resource conservation efforts as well as their food access contributions.

**Becoming Community Partners**

I attended One Grub Community as a guest and volunteer for months, beginning in April of 2019, before the idea of becoming community partners even came into my mind. A community partner is defined by the UTEP Center for Community Engagement as organizations that work with staff, faculty, and students to help meet the needs of our community (UTEP CCE). After finding them at the downtown farmers’ market thanks to the Veg Society of El Paso who pointed my family to them, OGC became a spot where I could bring my books and draft my papers comfortably while having coffee, delicious plant-based food, and being surrounded by nice people. When I first volunteered at the garden, my partner and I found a whole new understanding of what it is that they were about; Adriana gave us an orientation to give new volunteers a thorough idea of what it is that they do, how the Garden Days program works, what their plans are for the cafe (including the blueprint for the cafe and future retail space) and a bit about their programs in case the volunteers ever need to take advantage of them. My partner, then 3-year-old daughter, and I dove in despite not having too much experience with gardening. I learned to do things I never even thought of doing in the past, like seeding flowers and turning compost. My partner did a lot of the heavy lifting like manually cutting the grass, turning the compost pile, and lifting heavy items that were needed since the females outnumbered the male volunteers, and he felt good being able to provide them with that kind of help while getting to know some of the nicest people that we met in El Paso. Even though initially our daughter was still a bit too young to participate in actual gardening activities over the three hours as some of the older kids, she would help with a task and then run over to the playground and get to play
and socialize with other kids. Going to Garden Days became a habit because it was a welcoming space where each of our family members enjoyed ourselves and got to be outside and relax, talk to kind and interesting people from all occupations, social classes, and areas of El Paso that we would not be able to meet in our everyday lives, as well as be able to introduce an unfamiliar environment to our daughter that helped reinforce respect for the Earth, where our food comes from and all the work that goes into a harvest.

In the semester of fall 2019, I took a course on urban sociology where I started to read literature on urban and community gardens and their benefits in feeding people during the Great Depression and throughout history. I had also discovered in my time in graduate school that there was a way to do research along with the community that allows for an immersive experience that allows the researcher and the ‘participants’ of the study, in many cases an organization or social/geographic group, to work in partnership toward a common goal. This was often referred to as Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), and as previously mentioned, it helps explore local knowledge from within the community. Because of these realizations, I started to value One Grub Community even more and decided I wanted to interview Roman and Adriana for my urban sociology course. After the initial interview, I was excited to learn there was so much more to tap into regarding this organization and cafe.

**A History of Social Entrepreneurship: Roman and Adriana’s Story**

As social entrepreneurs, Roman and Adriana represent a chain effect of profit put towards a mission of food justice - including access and sovereignty. Social entrepreneurship can be defined as the combining of a social mission with business practices, rather than business entrepreneurs who make a business purely to profit - including “hybrid organizations mixing not-for-profit and for-profit elements,” like One Grub Community and Planty for the People (Dees
Social entrepreneurs tend to take on societal issues that our governing bodies fall short on, and though they do not take away the necessity for these institutions to fix their systems, social entrepreneurship provides community relief for pressing social issues by generating business opportunities with a social conscience (Dees 1998). Roman and Adriana’s mission is to provide this relief through any avenue possible, whether that is providing fresh food items to their neighborhood, or education on how to grow food, stay healthy, or cook plant-based foods.

I first spoke with them about the history of their cafe as well as their non-profit organization, Planty for the People, in September of 2019 to better understand their mission and background and their impact on the community. It all started with two individuals with a heart for community engagement and food justice. As Roman puts it, for him “it was a lifetime in the making.” He has had a love for cooking ever since he was four years old when he first started cooking scrambled eggs in the microwave for his family. His aspirations became a reality when he achieved his goal of working in fine dining at the El Paso-famous Cafe Central. However, there was a turning point where Roman began to shift his focus onto giving back to the community. “Food was always at the center of what I was doing, but I started really getting involved, along with [my wife] Adriana, in community service,” Roman explains. The pair had become involved with a non-profit organization called Apartment Life, which allowed them to be coordinators of community engagement at an apartment community in return for discounted rent. As coordinators, Roman and Adriana could throw any kind of events to bring residents together, and they naturally chose to do that through food. Roman recalls making a huge meal and inviting residents to come and join them. Through this program, community service, engagement, and commensality quickly became a part of their core mission in life. “I’ve always had a heart for servanthood and hospitality, [but when I was] working in the industry, I’d kind of
lost track of. It just becomes you’re working and you’re cooking, and you’re just churning out food.” When he was able to come together with Adriana, on the other hand, they were able to focus on bringing social good to the community through food, while feeling fulfilled.

Though working with this non-profit organization was not a sustainable career choice for Roman and Adriana, this experience did not go to waste in the slightest. For the time being though, Adriana began to work for the City of El Paso and Roman began to look towards education; since Roman had always had a passion for food, becoming a college professor to educate the community about food systems was an easy transition. This, along with their new, bountiful home garden, began to transform Roman’s definition of food and what it meant to him. “It went from a career to realizing how connected we are to food, and how connected that makes us to the Earth, all that stuff that was already kind of in me as a little kid,” he states. He describes how he reattached himself to the passion that was in him as a child, recalling his “how to save the earth” books and his attempts to start a compost pile underneath his sink. Roman’s life purpose and career came together, and he expressed that it became a personal, spiritual journey.

Roman teaches us that lifelong passions can be turned into meaningful, purposeful careers. Roman said his life has always centered around food and respecting the Earth, but he got sidetracked when he started working in the industry as a teenager. He did not feel fulfilled and knew he was going down the right path for him. He started teaching at El Paso Community College around 2005 and was great at it, which his students did not hesitate to tell him, this path ended up teaching him just as much as he was teaching the students, and his eyes were opened to food systems, the meat industry, socioeconomics and how that plays into our food choices, and gardens. “It really started shaping the way I was thinking about food,” Roman started in an
interview with Dr. Meredith Abarca in 2019 in a Food Voices of El Paso podcast. “It really got me to understand that food is not just a product that you put on a plate. Food is way more important than that.” He started to realize that he was teaching his students (and himself) much more than just culinary arts, but a relationship with food. This knowledge became central to him, more important than cooking techniques. He started to respect food outside of the globalized food system as we know it today and to respect where the food came from. This inspired him to grow a garden, remove meat and animal products from his diet, and change how he grew up, which was extremely different from the life he lives now. Roman gets emotional thinking about how fast food and processed foods shaped his young life completely and the negative consequences caused by eating fast, processed, animal-based foods had on him and his family’s health.

After working as a college professor, Roman started working in the industry again as the opening chef with a local cafe called Mustard Seed cafe in the exact location where One Grub Community is now located; this time, things were different, since he was able to work in a cafe that had a pay-what-you-can payment model. Roman recalls how he saw the need for vegan food while working there - such high demand, that the cafe decided to make the menu 50% vegan. “People were like “we’re here for the vegetarian option” and they came out of the woodwork. I wanted to feed them. Food access took on a new meaning. My intention was to feed the hungry, to feed the poor, and provide food for those with special diets.”

It was at Mustard Seed that he was also exposed to One World Everybody Eats, a non-profit organization based in Utah on which the Mustard Seed Cafe model was based. The model deeply inspired both Roman and Adriana, to the point where after working at Mustard Seed he felt unfulfilled after witnessing such a model. Adriana described how Denise Cerreta started her
own cafe in Salt Lake City, Utah in 2003. Cerreta’s cafe was not doing too well and she was contemplating closing her business. One day, she had an idea to offer food at the cost that her customers thought it was worth. Though her customers may have been confused, it inspired Cerreta to take on a new business model that provided food for people who may not be able to afford it. Cerreta implemented many different tactics along the way, including a revolving menu and the ability for customers to choose what is on their plates to reduce food waste. This business model set Cerreta apart completely, so she formed One World Everybody Eats, and dedicated herself to spreading information on how to start and sustain this kind of cafe. Some of the tactics that Cerreta started were implemented by Roman and Adriana as well, like their token system in which an individual can purchase a “pay it forward” token for $12, which is redeemable for a meal at One Grub and give it to anyone who they see fit. So, by the time Roman learned about this model he could not go back to doing anything else; his urge to feed people, respect food, and respect the Earth had been ignited once he realized there was a practical way to do this and that it was already happening.

Adriana at this point in time, around 2017, was living a different reality. Her journey involved a previous business degree but a longing to study art. She was working for the city, and since they would pay most of her tuition, she decided to pursue her dreams and get a second degree in art. However, problems came up soon after beginning her art degree. She recalls “every time I moved up; they didn’t want to work with my schedule. And I did not see myself as a ‘lifer’ there. So, once they stopped working with my schedule, I knew it was time to move on.” That is when she knew it was time to leave that job and pursue something that would support her fully, which just happened to be when she and Roman had a friend who was selling a food truck. They decided to purchase it and begin working together toward their own initiative,
selling food with a tip jar that served as the Pay-It-Forward funding source. Roman says, “I just wanted to create something with people, and just collaborate, collaborate. And this whole time I had been feeling the pressure that nobody was going to do it the way I intended, you know?” he says. “That was getting very real. That food truck fell on me, so we just got out there and started using it, and it took off.”

It was at this time that Roman began to really observe and hone into the demand for vegan food. They had “99.999% vegan food,” as they say, but noticed that many factors created a need for special diets. “Whenever I thought about food access, I always included people that have special diets. Because before I did not realize that this was an issue too, it was eye-opening,” Roman recalls. “It became bringing access to a sect of people that it wasn’t that they couldn’t afford it - It was that they couldn’t find it. So, they were willing to pay and they were willing to help someone who couldn’t afford it.” It became just as important to provide that gluten-free option to someone who had celiac or the dairy-free option to someone who is lactose intolerant. “Anybody that’s giving themselves over to a special diet or something has to put more intention towards food, and it becomes difficult. If you can be a route of support for that I think it will become easier for a person and then it will enhance wherever they are at in life, and then they will share it. The food access is central to that,” Roman says. The intentionality behind the decision to make OGC plant based as a means of supporting people who eat alternative diets by increasing access is apparent.

So, when their food truck launched in 2018, they became El Paso’s first fully plant-based restaurant. Roman and the team would attend local events in their food truck and offer their foods at the downtown farmer’s market. Most notably, they would put together the pay-it-forward funds that they received from donations and use it to feed people at local shelters like
the Annunciation House which helps migrants and Opportunity House for the homeless. This was something that he and Adriana felt very positively about. As they explain, what these individuals in these shelters are usually fed is “just not sustainable food, it’s not going to keep people healthy and well. And we really felt like we should provide that,” says Roman. Sadly, their time with the food truck was halted shortly after they began when the truck died “for the umpteenth time.” Adriana states, “We had the food truck only for 3 months before it broke down. It broke down the week that I quit my job to help him run the food truck fully and we did not know what we were going to do. We were both at a loss. That was everything.”

During this challenging time, the couple had to adapt as good social entrepreneurs do; Dees (1998) the key element to successful social entrepreneurship “is persistence combined with a willingness to make adjustments as one goes. Rather than giving up when an obstacle is encountered, entrepreneurs ask, ‘How can we surmount this obstacle? How can we make this work?’”. So, they focused on their involvement at the farmer’s market. The coordinator had urged Roman and Adriana to continue selling food but focus on just providing one of their most popular and well-known items - their seitan gyro plant-based meat - so they did. “That’s when we kind of turned into a mobile-deli grocer,” Adriana says. “We had to evolve to be able to sell food at the farmer’s market. And we did that for about a year before we decided that we had enough business to support our own space.” Roman still had connections at the Mustard Seed Cafe and found out around this time that they would be moving out. So, they contacted the church where the cafe was located and asked to lease the space, only to get rejected. They explored various other options to no avail, which proved frustrating for Roman and Adriana, but things ended up falling into place; after yet another proposal fell through, they received a call from the church letting them know they were ready to hear them out. They were finally able to
produce a proposal and things began to fall together. Adriana says, “We knew the space, the demographic that they were working with, we knew the amenities that we were working with, we knew how large this space was, the gardens… and [after realizing how large the actual space we might have was] we were like, ‘we can do so much here.’ This spurred them into realizing they could use the space and offer education and affordable produce while reinvigorating the garden, on top of just offering a restaurant. The building owners loved their proposal and they have been in their current space for two years.

**Planty for the People’s Current Programs**

Currently, Planty for the People and One Grub Community have the pay-it-forward program in effect and providing free meals for a minimum of one hour of volunteerism to people who need it, no questions asked. This program currently provides about 150 meals a month for volunteers. A manifestation of this program is Garden Days, a volunteer opportunity in which they invited anyone and everyone to help in the garden every Wednesday from 9-12 in the morning in return for a pay-it-forward meal of up to $12. This project helped to upkeep their garden that produces an abundance of healthy herbs, vegetables, fruits, and flowers efficiently while educating the public how to grow their own foods, how to compost, what foods grow well in the desert of El Paso, and other related tips and tricks about gardening. Most importantly, this program provided a structured means for food access; in return for their help, all volunteers who help in the garden for at least one hour receive a free ‘pay-it-forward’ meal from the revolving weekly menu that is always 100% plant-based. Adriana made it clear that their intentionality was to leave out a “qualifying factor” for people to meet when they request a pay it forward meals, to include anyone who may be temporarily struggling due to job loss or other life events or does not meet government requisites for assistance programs but is still in need.
To fund this program, and to continue to provide “pay-it-forward” meals to the rest of the community, five percent of One Grub Community profits, as well as all tips, are donated to the organization and customers can also “purchase” a Pay-It-Forward coin (pictured below). This coin will either be invested back into their business and used by One Grub Community to sponsor the nonprofit, Planty for the People, or the guest can decide to give it back out to someone in need who cannot afford to pay for their own meal. Before the pandemic, they were going strong for more than a year of Garden Days, their Wednesday gathering of volunteers who would learn about gardening while helping to upkeep it, and then receive a pay-it-forward meal in return for their time. At contrasting times during the pandemic when it is allowed, they can have small groups of volunteers come to learn about gardening and/or receive a pay-it-forward meal in return. This program is instrumental in both education of long-term food growing as well as short-term food access since anyone at any time can also ask to volunteer for a minimum of one hour and receive a pay-it-forward meal. Their pay-it-forward began as a tip jar in which all tips were pooled to contribute to the cost of a large meal that would be taken to different homeless, migrant, and battered women’s’ shelters.
Planty for the People also has an ongoing partnership with UTEP’s golden age program, where they can work with adults aged 50+ who are looking to learn healthier ways of cooking as well as stay active, but this program is currently on hold during the pandemic. This program offered donation-based yoga classes every month at One Grub Community as well as hands-on cooking courses by Roman who would walk everyone through processes such as nixtamalization. The Golden Age program has also provided donation-based yoga classes offered to all in the community, sharing this practice of “paying it forward” with other seniors in the community.

Planty for the People is now selling their garden-grown produce at One Grub community in a pay-what-you-can model. The menu includes seasonal harvests and suggested donation rates, but customers can pay what they are able to or what they have on them rather than a set price. Adriana and Roman are currently in the process of setting up the grocery store in the large space that is One Grub Community and has plans to apply for WIC-certified meals.
Additionally, Roman and Adriana are intentional about partnering with local small businesses, including farms and small vegan food businesses, by providing their goods at OGC. Figure 5 below shows the various businesses that they have partnered with.

![Diagram of local small business promotion program]

*Figure 5: Local Small Business Promotion Program*

Pop up events and classes and collaborations were also a big part of how OGC and Planty for the People operated and are planning to do so in the future after the pandemic. They are constantly partnering with local organizations like La Semilla, including Anthony Youth Farm, Texas A&M Agriculture, local schools, and even local small businesses to create ample opportunities for education, food access, and to support these local businesses. Before the pandemic hit, they had just started to offer various 6-week courses on different gardening and nutrition classes (container gardening, art workshops, food safety course, and were planning on so much more. More details on the impact of the pandemic will be shared in chapter 5. Below is a visual representation of some of the organizations and community leaders that Planty for the People has interacted with.
Figure 6: Partnerships and Outreach initiatives of Planty for the People
CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Orientation for the Study

Environmental justice (EJ) practice and literature is defined by the inequitable distribution of many environmental dangers (Agyeman, Schlosberg, Craven, Matthews, 2016). The problem that EJ is combatting is environmental racism and other systemic obstacles have caused this unequal distribution of environmental dangers, from nuclear waste facilities and smelters to food insecurity - all of which have ultimately been associated with long-lasting health risks (Darby 2012; Gallinar et al., 2017). The environmental justice movement emerged in close relation to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and in response to ‘mainstream’ environmental organizations who were not considering the extremely unjust environmental outcomes that were taking place in low income and minority communities like that of El Paso (Agyeman et al., 2016).

One of the three emerging research themes in environmental justice research according to Chakraborty, Collins, and Grineski (2016) is “promoting and achieving EJ by implementing interventions to improve environmental knowledge and health, [and] identifying avenues for sustainable community change” (p. 1072). One Grub Community addresses issues of environmental justice in their mission and in their educational and community-building efforts, through workshops and classes. These kinds of initiatives in lower-income neighborhoods have the potential to empower marginalized individuals by beginning to provide equity in the realm of food justice.

Food justice literature according to Alkon (2018) includes the convergence of environmental justice and alternative agriculture that promotes food sovereignty merging with food studies. The heavy influence of EJ on food justice can be seen through a major goal of the
movement, which is food access for all, no matter their race, income, or any other factors (Glennie and Alkon 2018; Alkon 2018). Because food access has been associated with access to supermarkets, food justice literature has focused on geographically quantifying grocery stores, supermarkets, restaurants, etc. within zip codes to determine if a zip code is a ‘food desert,’ or an area devoid of supermarket access (Walker, Keane, Burke, 2010). Food justice and insecurity literature is covered in depth later in this chapter, but from my analysis, unequal distribution of nutritional foods (and food at all) is definitely an issue that the community of El Paso is facing (Gallinar et al., 2017).

I will employ an Urban Political Ecology (UPE) approach to show how One Grub Community is empowering the community from various angles and addressing the causes of food injustice through their efforts. Agyeman and McEntee (2014) discuss how the food justice movement can advance through Urban Political Ecology, since this theory simultaneously addresses the very real symptoms of an unjust food system, while also placing a major focus on the relationship between the economic, political, and cultural processes that have played a part in the system. This focus allows for addressing the issues that have caused our food system to fail (i.e., people, especially of color and low-income, going hungry), with the hope of changing them, and negating the outcomes once and for all (Agyeman and McEntee 2014). Agyeman and McEntee (2014) argue that these issues include the commodification of food and the lack of state-involvement and responsibility for our food system and its shortcomings. This suggests that the state must take more responsibility for the food system, instead of the market, as food should no longer be looked at as a commodity, but as a right of the people (Agyeman and McEntee 2014).
Further, Urban Political Ecology focuses on eliminating the structural and institutional issues that have led to food insecurity, like racism for example. Further, Agyeman and McEntee (2014) argue that structural and institutional racism are embedded in the market itself, which is another reason for the state to be more involved in fixing the current food system, so that food access is not as dependent on socioeconomic factors and the market, but as a right of each person. UPE’s emphasis on processes and outcomes is important to One Grub Community’s mission and their efforts, as they are encouraging change in both aspects of the food system.

It is important to note that One Grub Community/Planty for the People takes a well-rounded, holistic approach to food justice in the border community of El Paso. They do not advocate one “answer” to food justice as a cure-all for the food insecurity in the community, but instead, try to combat it with as many strategies as possible. Their Urban Political Ecology related strategies that they take include their current efforts in applying for EBT certification so that customers that use food stamps to purchase their food can come and purchase frozen plant-based meals and organic produce from their garden and other local farms and gardens with the help of government programs. This strategy of gaining EBT certification of health food allows us to question what might happen if the only foods that were EBT certified were healthy, nutritionally dense foods.

Another UPE-related strategy is their many educational efforts including Garden Days and other free workshops (container gardening, nutritional talks, etc.) that challenge the current food system by empowering individuals. Therefore, they do not necessarily promote only the state taking charge of the food system, they also empower those individuals (who are able to) to take charge of their own food systems, therefore creating systemic change and there-by sharing responsibility of efforts to work on food insecurity. These strategies focus on the long-term
plight of food justice, while other strategies that One Grub Community employs attend to the urgent outcomes of the food system (people that are currently hungry or do not have the time or resources to grow their own food). They also include their volunteer opportunities that offer a free, nutritious meal for anyone who needs it in exchange for at least one hour of volunteer work. They may come back every week and volunteer outside of Garden Days if they need it. One Grub Community also strategizes under a more traditional food justice approach to food insecurity, which has to do with supermarket access, in their current efforts in developing their cafe into a retail store as well, in a zip code that has no supermarkets within walking distance.

In many ways, the UPE-related strategies that are undertaken are resistance to the current food production and distribution system, while at the same time creating a new system of value and labor that is based on the idea of self-valorization of work through work (Valle 2017). Specifically, to deconstruct the capitalist system that has led to various levels of food insecurity, “work must be placed outside of the capitalist mode of production in order to create self-valorizing work,” (Valle 2017). To function in this system, you must of course make a profit, which One Grub Community works towards, but a percentage of their profits are also used to sponsor the non-profit they created Planty for the People. In this way, their overall strategy allows for a new network of people putting in ‘labor’ in return for values defined outside of a monetary reward. This is materially and immediately through a free meal from One Grub Community sponsored by Planty for the People, but the rewards also manifest on other levels - knowledge, social support, healing, relaxation, connection, nourishment, and over time, abundant harvests of vegetables, herbs, and fruits, which lead to the formation of new food networks. This is how we move through from “the self-valorization of zero work to the self-valorization through work,” (Valle 2017).
Although there are many benefits of community gardens like that of One Grub Community, it is important to not over-romanticize them. Valle (2017) warns that if you do become “over romantic about the notions of a community garden,” you may let your guard down, and must remember that corruption and exploitation can still arise in places like these, so a discerning mind is key. Additionally, steps need to be taken by organizations who manage community gardens to ensure that no one is taken advantage of. This can be done by having an open conversation with volunteers during their orientation or at a meeting about protecting each other and encouraging people to speak up if anything inappropriate happens while volunteering.

**Standpoint Theory**

To define my theoretical lens a bit further, I will discuss the standpoint theory and how it relates to this study. This epistemological theory arose from feminist thought that challenged the concept of objectivity as it relates to empiricism, or the doctrine that says knowledge is produced only from sensory experience and is objective (Naples and Gurr 2013). Naples and Gurr (2013) argue that feminist standpoint theory awards attention to diversity of individual experience as well as the socioeconomic background of that individual. Standpoint theory arose in the 1970s and allows for marginalized groups, or writers, researchers, and thinkers to have a voice from where they stand, challenging the status quo of white-male dominated research (Swigonski 1994). This theory asserts that the position where the researcher is standing shapes the research itself, and it is important for the contextualization of this work.

With this in mind, I am a subject in my own right in what I am studying, which consequently shapes and affects what is written in this work, and this comes with benefits and drawbacks. Standpoint theory is particularly relevant to “ways of knowing” given that I came to Planty for the People and One Grub as a volunteer and then as a graduate student researcher.
However, it was my interaction with the organization’s leadership that motivated me to become an academic partner. I am someone who was drawn in by the plant-based menu initially. However, it was Roman’s generous and jovial way of being that kept my family and I engaged as customers and it was Adriana’s transparency and knowledgeable, goal-oriented demeanor that hooked us as volunteers.

The pay-it-forward meal offered at One Grub through volunteer work in the garden that was also a part of the experience that my family marveled at, partially because we knew we could really use it at certain points. In this way, I do have an ‘inside’ perspective of what someone who may be considered ‘food insecure’ as a graduate student. The subjectivity I contribute to this work stems from my role as a volunteer, a customer, and later as a researcher and partner; these are various roles contribute insights that form this standpoint. Some scholars have argued that there is an inherent tension in this bias paradox, to which others argue that this tension can be resolved by the viewpoint that the contingent and contextual factors that makeup researchers’ standpoints help to justify the knowledge that is being produced rather than disrupting it (Bowell, n.d.). In lay terms, when someone is immersed in something, they will know it better than someone looking at a topic or community from the outside in. Other scholars argue that this insider’s perspective might even increase objectivity; Harding (1986) argued that “knowledge produced from the point of view of subordinated groups may offer stronger objectivity,” because they may be even more motivated to explore and include views and perspectives of those in power. The diverse ways of knowing through the various roles I have developed throughout this research experience have hence developed many standpoints as legitimate ways of producing knowledge.
Review of the Literature

Food Insecurity in El Paso, the Border Region, and the United States

Sociological and food justice research on food insecurity, the lack of consistent access to enough food for a healthy, active life, is a well-known issue that unfortunately affects the lives of residents of El Paso. In a Paso Del Norte food access study, Gallinar et al. (2017) used GIS (Geographical Information Systems) mapping software to map out the supermarkets throughout the city of El Paso to measure food access. The authors found that much of the city was food insecure especially the margins in the eastern portions of El Paso, where colonias are located (more on this later), and the downtown area. El Paso is among the fastest-growing metropolitan areas in the nation but has fewer supermarkets per capita than most major cities (Gallinar et al., 2017). This study also incorporated a survey representing 30 El Paso county zip codes that measured food sources and residents’ perceptions of the food environment regarding food insecurity. The result of Gallinar’s (2017) study found that residents’ perceptions of food insecurity were three times as high in the border town when compared to the rest of the country.

Much of the literature surrounding food access, including Gallinar et al., (2017), suggests that access to unhealthy foods leads to disproportionate percentages of malnutrition, obesity, and disease among the population, while access to healthy foods leads to the opposite including healthy weight and Body Mass Index (BMI) level (Gallinar et al., 2017; Estevez, Jaceldo-Siegli, Hayes-Bautista, Flores, and Jordan, 2019). The importance of disease prevention is even more magnified by the notion that many of the individuals in this area (especially those who are unauthorized immigrants or in the process of gaining citizenship) experience a complex web of barriers when it comes to obtaining health care (Heyman et al., 2009), posing a hefty obstacle for them when they become unwell.
Dean et al. (2012) had similar findings when studying 50 Mexican-origin children in the US-Mexico border region and their nutritional habits. They found that 64% of families surveyed reported low or very low food security as well as that few children met the nutrition requirements for calcium, fiber, or even sodium; none met the requirement for vitamin D, including sun exposure. Unfortunately, they too found that food insecurity was associated with greater calorie intake overall and percentage of calories from fat and added sugar (Dean et al., 2012). Despite the children having less access to foods that supplied them with adequate nutrition, they were filling up on empty calories from sugar and had a higher percentage of fat intake than the average child, which are both associated with obesity (HFAC 2010; USDA). Children in these rural communities on the border are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity, due in great part to the lack of supermarkets and the geographic distance between colonias and larger urban centers.

Issues of malnutrition go beyond food insecurity, as obesity is very prevalent in the U.S. and in Texas - in particular, the Healthy Food Advisory Committee (HFAC) of Texas (2010) found that as of 2009, two-thirds of Texas adults were either overweight or obese. Obesity not only has dire health consequences such as heart disease (the number one killer in America) (HFAC 2010), cancer, diabetes, high blood pressure, etc. (Bargar 2017), but it also has economic consequences. According to the HFAC (2010), those who are obese may end up paying 42% more in health care costs when compared to those at a healthy weight. Food insecurity and obesity are linked in the literature on malnutrition often associated with a populations’ socioeconomic status (Dean et al., 2012; Adams, Grummer-Strawn, and Chavez 2003). Both health and income must be addressed in marginalized communities like that of El Paso; I argue that engaging in community
education and activities associated with gardening and food sovereignty are important strategies for changing the broken food system in the U.S.

As previously mentioned, *colonias* are some of the hardest-hit areas of the border region when it comes to food access. Nunez-Mchiri et al. (2017) documented portraits of food insecurity to analyze the ways in which *colonias*, or unincorporated communities on the outskirts of urban centers in the U.S.-Mexico Border - specifically, in the El Paso del Norte region, suffer through food insecurity. The authors of this ethnographic work spoke with 6-8 women of this region to interview them about their stories and struggles in feeding themselves and their families and found that they used many strategies to keep their families fed when their circumstances changed. Researchers also interviewed colonia residents in their homes and in local food distribution centers or food pantries in southern New Mexico and in El Paso County, TX. A few patterns were observed concerning how families became food insecure, including one of the providers of the family either losing their job or being deported from the country (leaving the rest of the family to fend for themselves in terms of food), low income due to inability to work because of legal status, or low-paying odd jobs, and lack of or limited transportation (both public and personal) (Nunez et al., 2017). One of the creative solutions that the people of *colonias* devised to deal with food insecurity are *pulgas* or flea markets, where traditional and prepared foods, as well as a variety of fruits and vegetables, sold by individual vendors who visit the communities, due in part to lack of supermarkets offering fresh produce options (Sharkey et al., 2012). Merchants bring fresh fruit and vegetables to communities, providing food access for some residents, but not all. Sharkey et al. (2012) calls for more studies to be conducted on alternative food sources in this area so that we can learn more about how we can feed this population.
To compare the borderlands’ experience of food deserts to the rest of the country, we can refer to *Disparities and access to healthy food in the United States: A review of food deserts literature* (Walker et al., 2010). This study provides a systematic review of food desert literature in the United States by analyzing 31 studies that employed 9 different methods (including GIS technology and the use of census data, interviews, focus groups etc.) (Walker et al., 2010). The major findings help contextualize the study at hand. Walker et al. (2010) found that the availability of healthy and nutritious foods has become a major focus of food desert literature since it is now more widely recognized that health is extremely dependent on diet. Another theme, evidence of racial or ethnic and income disparities that exist within food deserts, was found throughout these 31 studies, and was closely intertwined with the EJ movement and is relevant to El Paso. This is because in almost all the studies analyzed, areas that have high respective percentages of minorities and/or low-income families typically had only a fraction of supermarkets close to them, and even higher food costs, than did more affluent or white areas (Walker et al., 2010).

On the other hand, fast food establishments are more plentiful in these low-income areas when compared with middle to high income areas, as well as in minority areas, as 10 of the 12 studies showed in a systematic review on fast food access (Fleischhacker, Evenson, Rodriguez, Ammerman, 2011). The authors cite “increased crime” for an explanation of why food costs tend to be higher in urban low-income areas, since theft is often a factor in these areas; also, it could be due to less supermarkets being available in these areas (Walker et al., 2010). Regardless, the literature suggests that supermarkets tend to stay invested in neighborhoods with denser populations where they are guaranteed to see a return on their investment; in some cases, supermarkets remain in these urban areas because the area may be predominantly white - this
implies profit for these retailers (Walker et al., 2010). Though these may be unintentional consequences that are regarded by the business community as savvy business decisions through a capitalistic lens, they can affect people’s lives in significant ways both in the short and long term.

Walker et al. (2010) also identified gaps found in food desert literature; these gaps include the exploration of the impact of residing in a food desert, the impact of policy on food access, and the use of a more ecological approach to food access research by including more of the “dynamic interaction between other food venues, including restaurants, corner stores, gas stations, etc.” (p. 882).

The proposed research conducted at One Grub Community addresses at least 2 of these 3 areas. They are a restaurant, and they are also trying to influence policy (by applying for EBT certification as retailers). Walker et al. (2010) recommend mixed-method research studies for the study of food deserts, as it may be useful to include both objective and subjective perceptions. They also advise participatory research methods, with a focus on comparisons between participants who live in a food oasis versus those who live in a food desert if possible, which my study will provide. This is because some people choose to volunteer at the garden for their own personal growth or healing from trauma (and this is not to be discredited as less important than being food insecure) or for educational purposes for them or their families, but many volunteers are also there because it is their access to nutritionally dense foods for the week. Many of the customers also go because they have been given a Pay-It-Forward coin (a donated, prepaid meal voucher) and want to claim their meal. This is part of the beauty that the organization allows for; people from all ages, careers, countries, religions, and ways of life to be in one welcoming space that offers “peace, love, and grub,” as their motto says.
Urban Gardening History, Benefits & Community Building

Many studies have found evidence of the wide range of benefits associated with urban and community gardening (Dyg et al., 2019; Kingsley 2009; Carney et al., 2012). Gardens also hold deeper meanings for people who would otherwise not have access to green spaces in desert landscapes and in marginalized communities. One of these studies is a thematic review of community gardening articles published from 1980 through 2017 that shows these benefits have been shown to impact people on both an individual level and a social/relational level (Dyg et al., 2019). Another theme identified in these articles is that participation in community gardens has the potential to enhance the wellbeing of vulnerable populations like low-income or minority populations (Dyg et al., 2019). In a qualitative research project undertaken in Australia, community garden members cited spiritual, fitness, and nutritional benefits to gardening (Kingsley 2009). Another study on an organic community garden’s impacts among Hispanic seasonal migrant farmworkers found physical, mental, economic, and family health were all positively impacted - especially family health (Carney et al., 2012). These mixed methods study further confirmed that participation in community gardening led to increased vegetable intake and decreased food insecurity (Carney et al., 2012), a significant finding that shows how gardens work to address food insecurity, specifically.

Armstrong (2000) utilizes a quantitative approach that focused on the benefits of urban gardens by sampling 20 urban gardens in upstate New York. He found that the most common reason that individuals chose to volunteer in gardening were access to fresh foods, to enjoy nature, and for health benefits. Armstrong (2000) also found an association between low-income neighborhoods and community issues being addressed because of involvement in urban gardening; this is a cycle often seen in the gardening literature.
Valle’s (2017) research focuses on the complexities behind the practice of kitchen gardening in San Jose, California. Specifically, through his research, Valle brought three notable perspectives to gardening literature. Firstly, Valle (2017) looked at oppressed people within immigrant communities and how the food they have access to affects their bodies, families, and communities. They often are low-income, and have issues with transportation, unsafe neighborhoods, unsafe domestic water, not enough open or green spaces, and of course, low access to healthy, fresh foods (Valle 2017). Despite these barriers, people of these communities humbly shared food with one another and transformed the value of their resources continually, oftentimes through the practice of home gardening. Valle (2017) found that gardens made a significant contribution to their budgets, both in savings from food bills at the grocery store, but also because they were able to sell the excess fruits and vegetables they produced. In this way, Valle’s research echoes other food justice studies in that gardening is found to be a tool that helps protect people against hunger, poor health outcomes, environmental degradation, low wages, and even cultural identity (Valle 2017).

Secondly, Valle (2017) speaks of a new economic reality that gardening is challenging the mainstream rational choice theory (RCT), which holds that humans will always prioritize pleasure and profit. Gardeners in San Jose seemed to be doing the opposite, and instead worked within their social networks to share their abundant harvests with one another; in this way, Valle (2017) echoes other food justice scholars, in stating that gardening can be a political act because of its potential to transform societal economic norms. Valle (2017) notes “the convivial labor and social relations of the kitchen gardens I worked with produce values beyond any form a mainstream or neoliberal economist would willingly recognize” (p. 44). Further, the value the gardeners of San Jose produced was constantly in the process of being reinvented.
Valle’s (2017) third contribution involves a decolonial perspective that not only reclaims food sovereignty, but also heals what he refers to as historical or intergenerational trauma that was caused by colonization, as well as racism, discrimination, and environmental neglect. This trauma, Valle holds, is evident in the health of immigrants, such as their well-recognized but often poorly managed predisposition to diabetes (2017). Gardening provides a way for individuals who are struggling with food choices to reclaim some power in their own backyards, again by lowering food costs, but also by providing a spiritual connection through the growth of medicinal and ceremonial plants, and even decreasing these individuals’ communities’ dependency on food aid (Valle 2017). Finally, Valle (2017) expressed his encouragement for “collaborative, community-based, action-oriented research” on kitchen gardens and their social contributions (p. 61).

Another gardening scholar, Sokolovsky (2010) provides a historical background of urban gardening in the U.S., which he gathered as a result of spending 12 years studying urban gardening in New York City. It was here that Sokolovsky witnessed the greening of the city, or what he refers to as “civic ecology” firsthand. One Grub Community participates in this process as they continue to tend to their garden and revitalize new beds, while often inspiring and/or helping volunteers and customers start their own gardens in the city as well. According to Sokolovsky (2010), the origin of urban gardening dates to the late 19th century, when they were used to help poor U.S. citizens grow food during the depression (resulting in farms like the potato patch farms). Also, during the depression, New York City’s Welfare Department sponsored around 5,000 “relief” gardens on vacant public lands; these gardens that were abundant in whole, plant foods (and were devoid of animal products) went on to yield about 40%
of the United States’ food production during World War II and save many people from starvation (Sokolovsky 2010).

In the 1970s, the urban gardening movement emerged in NYC despite crime and drug-trades (Sokolovsky 2010). Pioneers of the movement were dedicated to reclaiming empty lots and transforming them into gardens, educating others on how to do this, and feeding their communities. Urban community gardens then became a form of activism in that individuals began to care about their communities enough to physically care for them, which often led to care about other issues in their communities (Sokolovsky 2010).

In addition to the community engagement that naturally develops while participating in urban gardening, Sokolovsky (2010) also explained some of the social benefits as the interaction between individuals of all ages that would otherwise be limited if it were not for urban gardens. Many senior citizens tended to be leaders of the gardens in New York, because of their past experiences that involved being more connected to the Earth and the knowledge that resulted from that connection. They typically knew much about the medicinal properties and nutritional benefits of the herbs, fruits, and vegetables they grew (Sokolovsky 2010). The diversity of individuals who came together for a common purpose resulted in an increase of social capital (larger social networks, more social trust) for each individual, which led to increased community support, and eventually, a reduction in neighborhood crime rates (Sokolovsky 2010). This statement is backed by the “largest study of crime and community ever completed in Chicago,” which found a strong association between civic greening and safer environments (Sokolovsky 2010, p. 407).
The third theme of this review will address One Grub Community’s conscious choice to provide plant-based food, and how it affects the community’s health, the environment, and social support among those who follow a plant-based diet. Unfortunately, our country has witnessed the health consequences of a meat and processed food-centric diet, which our population has shifted to in about the last 70 years (Beverland, 2014); studies have indeed associated heavy meat intake, and red and/or processed meats specifically, with cancers such as esophageal, gastric, and colorectal (Cross, Freedman, Ren, Ward, Hollenbeck, Schatzkin, and Abnet, 2011; Chao, Thun, Connell, McCullough, Jacobs, Flanders, and Calle, 2005). Processed foods have also long been associated shortened life expectancy, obesity, cancers, and chronic illnesses (Fuhrman, 2018).

In terms of health adequacy and benefits of a plant-based diet, there is plenty of evidence that demonstrates both. The American Dietetic Association (ADA) published their position on all vegetarian diets in 2009, which is as follows:

It is the position of the American Dietetic Association that appropriately planned vegetarian diets, including total vegetarian or vegan diets, are healthful, nutritionally adequate, and may provide health benefits in the prevention and treatment of certain diseases. Well-planned vegetarian diets are appropriate for individuals during all stages of the life cycle, including pregnancy, lactation, infancy, childhood, and adolescence, and for athletes. (Craig and Mangels 2009).

This study employs an evidence-based approach that the ADA defines as “rigorous standardization of review criteria,” that included a systemic analysis for many articles surrounding vegetarian diets of all kinds (Craig and Mangels, 2009).
likelihood of bias since they implemented a rigorous grading system for each reviewed article’s conclusion. The study goes through major nutrients that have been previously misconstrued as unavailable in vegan diets and give food suggestions for the respective nutrients and tips for absorption. They also summarize common chronic diseases and show evidence of how vegan diets can be used to battle these ailments (i.e., hypertension, diabetes, heart disease, cancer, and obesity) (Craig and Mangels, 2009). These diseases kill many humans every year (especially heart disease) (HFAC, 2010), so these results are not to be taken lightly, as they provide major implications for the healthfulness behind a vegan diet. The ADA urges health professionals to become well-versed on this information and to be prepared to help those who are interested in, transitioning to, or having issues with a vegetarian or vegan diet. Nutritional counseling and a well-planned diet can make a significant impact for anyone who is looking to become a more healthy, compassionate, and environmentally conscious human being through choosing this diet.

The ADA study as well numerous other studies have shown how eating nutrient-dense foods and specifically following a plant-based diet has the potential to put a stop to obesity, one of the biggest killers and causes of disease (Marks, 2015; Craig & Mangels 2009; Bartolotto 2013). For the Latino community, the consumption of a plant-based diet is evidently associated with a lower BMI (Body Mass Index) (Estevez et al., 2019). Being that El Paso is Hispanic at over 80%, this finding is relevant and valuable. Additionally, a study written to inform health professionals about plant-based diets, echoed the ADA in its findings that the diet can help reduce the use of medications for many individuals (i.e., treat and/or cure illnesses), lower body weight, decrease the risk of cancer, and reduce the risk of death from heart disease and diabetes (Bartolotto 2013).
Because of the inflated cost of certain specialty products that mimic animal foods that help people transition to a plant-based diet, many people have pre-existing notions that the plant-based diet is too expensive and inaccessible, some even refer to it as ‘elitist.’ This is despite some of the least expensive foods in supermarkets are plant-based, including rice, beans, and other grains and legumes, two major staples of this diet (unlike meats and cheeses, which are often expensive, especially when regarded as ‘grass fed’ or ‘organic’). Regardless, with the existence of more organizations like One Grub Community, this notion can be disproven, and plant foods could be made more accessible to all individuals. This is because growing fruits and vegetables from a garden has been proven to be more sustainable, both environmentally and cost-wise, which is dire for a community who has a higher percentage of residents under the poverty line than average (Beverland 2014; Wilson, Ngheim, Mhurchu, Eyles, Baker, and Blakeley 2013). A 2013 study in the Netherlands was designed to find an optimal diet that was low-cost, minimal impact toward the environment, and nourishing in that it meets all nutritional requirements (Wilson et al., 2013). They found 63 items that met these criteria; these are carbohydrate and fiber-rich plant-based, whole foods, such as whole grain bread, potatoes, muesli, open-field vegetables, and fruits; no animal products were included in this list (Wilson et al., 2013).

Additionally, many fewer resources - water and land - are associated with plant agriculture versus animal agriculture, leading to a dramatically decreased environmental footprint on the planet. A study published in Environmental Health Perspectives (Koneswaran and Nierenberg 2008) analyzed and expanded upon data demonstrating a connection between animal farming and climate change. The authors’ analysis shows that meat, egg, and dairy milk production encompasses not only “the direct rearing and slaughtering of animals, but also grain and fertilizer
production, waste storage and [proper] disposal, water use, and energy expenditures,” from the transportation of the animals’ feed that kept them alive, as well as the ‘finished’ animal product once it has been slaughtered (Koneswaran and Nierenberg 2008). This means keeping livestock alive requires so many resources in itself - in fact, “feeding the global population of livestock requires at least 80% of the world’s soybean crop and more than one-half of all corn production,” (Koneswaran and Nierenberg 2008 p. 579). All these aspects of animal agriculture coupled with growing livestock populations that are only expected to keep rising, cause dangerous outcomes for anyone on Earth due to the greenhouse gases emitted through the process of animal farming, especially carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide (Koneswaran and Nierenberg 2008). These include issues like droughts that in turn exacerbate hunger and disease, and an increased temperature for our planet, which in 2005 was said to possibly “hasten the speed at which infectious diseases emerge and reemerge” (Koneswaran and Nierenberg 2008). Given the circumstances of a current pandemic, this fact should be very alarming, not only for an individual but for decision-makers. For all these reasons, many scholars including Beverland (2014) regard the plant-based diet as “a way to reduce pollution, climate change, and species loss without reductions in lifestyles,” due to the diet’s ability to preserve forests, water, and emit fewer greenhouse gases (p. 372).

In the larger context of things, it is important to know that eating plant-based or diets are not new practices. As previously mentioned, the heavy reliance on plant-based diets was undertaken by people in the United States during the Depression of the 1930s, keeping many New York individuals healthy and out of starvation for years (Sokolovsky 2010). The diet rose in popularity during the counterculture movement in the 1960s when many people began to think about their food choices on an ethical level, and animal rights began to be considered (Lindquist
According to Beverland (2014) “cereal-based diets” with copious amounts of meat and processed foods only took precedence in the U.S. after World War II. The rise in meat production was coupled with the rise of factory farming and animal agriculture, which has wreaked havoc on our environment; in fact, “meat production directly accounts for between 18 and 50% of climate change emissions as well as producing substantial amounts of untreated waste” (Beverland 2014). How exactly is meat causing these alarming changes in our environment? The answer is through the deforestation, loss of wildlife, degradation of land, pollution of groundwater, and even the use of insecticides (for animal-based diseases that arise from this practice), all of which are necessary for ‘raising’ animals and keeping them alive until they are slaughtered (Beverland 2014). Because of this destruction, some societies do not even allow livestock production (Beverland 2014). If the impact of animal agriculture continues to be ignored by the U.S. government, the media, the public, and in many cases, even environmental and food justice literature, then a priority-reset is in order as the warming of the Earth continues and the costs associated with poor health culminating in death from preventable illnesses rise. It is unjust to provide animal products, even to vulnerable people, knowing everything we know about the impact it could cause down the road to these individuals’ health and environments when literature shows that oftentimes, their health and environments are already suffering.

Despite the many ecological, nutritional, and medicinal benefits of a plant-based diet, people who participate in plant-based consumption as vegans deal with higher-than-average social stigmas due to their alternative food and clothing choices (Lindquist 2013; Hodson and Macinnis 2015). Evidence of bias towards this subpopulation has been demonstrated empirically in a study where vegans were evaluated more negatively than “several common prejudice target groups (e.g., Blacks)” (Hodson and Macinnis 2015). Without social support, it has been found
that vegans can “relapse” back to eating animal products (Earle and Hodson 2018). Participation in “garden days” provides an antidote to these social inconveniences, by sparking social support for many of the volunteers who also eat plant-based diets, whether it be through a simple conversation or by the sharing of recipes and meals together.

Critique of Previous Research Methods

To compare the border region in Texas to the rest of the state, Adelbary, Klass, Salinas, Sexton, and Tapia (2014) conducted a quantitative study that explored and described the food environment and risk factors associated with food insecurity in Texas. This study used Modified Retail Food Environment Index (mRFEI), an index created by the Centers for Disease Control that scores census tracts by the presence/absence of grocery stores, convenience store, and restaurants in an area, as well as data from the 2010 U.S. Census (Adelbary et al., 2014). The findings revealed that the “overall food environment in Texas tends to be characteristic of a “food desert” according to CDC (Centers for Disease Control) definition,” (Adelbary et al., 2014), but also determined that the border region had “better food environments” as compared to the rest of the state, since the results show a higher average mRFEI score of 4.97 (Adelbary et al., 2014). Contradictorily, the study also showed that certain socioeconomic conditions, like percent below the poverty line, percent Hispanic, and percent on food stamps, are all associated with a decrease in mRFEI scores (Adelbary et al., 2014). This brings up questions about the methodology of this study considering the higher-than-average poverty level and high proportions of Hispanic residents in El Paso, factors that normally point to alternate findings (Census Bureau 2019). The use of census data to quantify food insecurity is a flawed method considering the number of unauthorized immigrants and residents living in communities that are socially and geographically distant and out of sight, such as rural colonias, which are severely...
underrepresented due to the nature of their residents’ legal status. As of 2017, there were an estimated 55,000 undocumented immigrants in El Paso according to the Pew Hispanic Center (2019). Therefore, measurements of food markets per capita would be inherently wrong. Latinos are less likely to report or participate in studies that make visible their immigrant status given their vulnerability to deportation and family separation. Additionally, studies have found that Hispanic/Latino families experience food insecurity at about double the rate as white families (Nunez-Mchiri et al., 2017). The flawed quantitative study is one of the reasons I have decided to take a mixed method approach with a qualitative focus in my own research. I believe my approach will better fit a sensitive topic like food access in a border region with higher-than-average percentages of immigrants who are unaccounted for. It may be hard to quantify this segment of the population via the census, so research strategies should be aimed at inclusion so that all humans in the area are accounted for.

On a more macro level, much of the food justice and insecurity literature reviewed above (e.g., Alkon 2018; Alkon 2016; HFAC 2010) has left out the plant-based diet despite its’ environmental benefits when compared with the detrimental effects of animal agriculture (Koneswaran and Nierenberg 2008), as well as the diets’ potential medicinal benefits and well-documented nutritional benefits (Craig and Mangels 2009). This can be seen in a review of the food justice approach by Alkon (2016), which gave an overview and noted two major goals of food justice: (1) increasing healthy food access to marginalized populations and (2) to help communities regain control of the food system. The plant-based diet is a missing key that has been demonstrated to help individuals and communities accomplish both goals cost-efficiently, more environmentally friendly, and most importantly in a health-promoting way.
Also, despite research regarding the plant-based diet and its benefits (Craig and Mangels 2010; Wilson et al., 2010; Marks 2015; Bartolotto 2013; Estevez et al., 2019), the Healthy Food Advisory Committee of Texas, who was created in 2009 to address healthy food insecurity in the state, is still not fully endorsing it, though they promote increased intake of fruits and vegetables and fresh food retailers outside of supermarkets such as community gardens and farmers markets (HFAC 2010). This is concerning when considering the health, environmental, and economic consequences of animal agriculture and production as aforementioned.

Finally, though there is an extensive body of research on the history and benefits of urban gardening, I did not find any studies on pay-it-forward systems among organizations or restaurants, that incorporated not only gardening, but also a mission of food access, and a nutritious plant-based menu into their models like One Grub Community has.

**Summary**

This chapter addresses studies on food insecurity, food deserts, and urban gardening in El Paso, in the border region, and in the U.S. I have provided a review of the literature on food access in the U.S., as well as the border region, the literature on urban gardening, and literature on the plant-based diet to show the context on which One Grub Community is based. These three realms are all vital to their approach and work together to allow the organization to help solve food injustices in comprehensive, fair, healthy, safe, and empowering ways.
CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to provide an organizational review to document One Grub Community’s contributions to the food justice movement while participating in their mission alongside the Wilcoxes. Chapter 5 will provide an analysis that includes the benefits, contributions, implications, and challenges found regarding this approach towards food justice and security.

Research Question

How does the One Grub Community/Planty for the People address issues of food insecurity in central El Paso, Texas? Additionally, how does One Grub address issues of food justice through its programs and services (e.g., community garden, community education, the pay-it-forward system, and the plant-based menu)? What motivates volunteers to participate in One Grub’s efforts? What draws customers to the One Grub restaurant? How is One Grub collaborating with other local community gardens to address broader issues of food insecurity in the El Paso del Norte border region? Who are the different stakeholders of the organization (i.e., customers, garden volunteers, produce box beneficiaries, community event participants) and how do they work together to address issues of food insecurity and social justice in our border region?

Target Population

The target population will be the business/organization of One Grub Community/Planty For the People, its customers, and volunteers. I wanted to canvas residents of the surrounding area of 901 Arizona Ave. (within a 1-mile radius), but because of the pandemic social distancing guidelines I decided this was not safe or practical. I interviewed a total of 8 key informants including owners/founders Adriana and Roman Wilcox, horticulturist and lead gardener Estela
Flores, long time volunteers, and customers. They were recruited through social media and established networks from before the pandemic. If they agreed to being interviewed and complete the consent form, I interviewed them.

**Mixed Methods Approach**

My research procedure is a mixed methods approach involving participatory research through my own volunteer experiences, content and narrative analysis, surveys, and semi-structured interviews. The umbrella approach that my research falls under is Community-Based Participatory Research, which evolved from the framework of community engaged research according to the Principles of Community Engaged Research (McCloskey, McDonald, Cook, Heurtin-Roberts, Updegrove, and Sampson, 2011). CBPR is achieved when “all collaborators respect the strengths that each brings to the partnership, and the community participates fully in all aspects of the research process” (McCloskey et al., 2011).

Though the bulk of my research has taken place at the location of One Grub Community in central El Paso, the pandemic has changed my approach to a majorly solitary one in the garden and a virtual one for interviews, surveys, and meetings. This research employs participatory approach as a volunteer for them in the gardens, at events, assisting with their grant applications, helping with planning, and helping with other marketing-related tasks (social media, newsletter), etc. I observed and participated in Garden Days on a regular basis for about one year, as well as their educational workshops, promotional volunteer meetings, and other events that I will be detailing in my results and discussion.

Two surveys were administered online: one for volunteers and one for customers. They will be designed and sent out through UTEP’s Question-Pro Software. The sampling design that is used for these surveys is opportunity sampling. One survey asks customers of One Grub
Community to reflect on their experiences and awareness of the programs that they have. The second survey will be for the volunteers and will include a Likert-scale response survey on their experiences while volunteering, including educational impacts, community impacts, and diet impacts regarding fruit and vegetable intakes. The survey data identifies factors relating to visibility, marketing, the dietary needs of customers, motivation behind doing business with One Grub Community, etc. Both surveys have been marketed through previously acquired email lists, and through Instagram and Facebook. Via these surveys, participants were asked if they would like to expand on their experiences through an interview with me which will also take place virtually because of COVID-19. Please see appendix 1 for the survey guides.

Additionally, I have conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with the owners, Roman and Adriana Wilcox, the garden educator and horticulturist Estela Flores, and garden volunteers and customers of the cafe (OGC). The interview guides were very fluid and multiple iterations were drafted until settling on the final questions, which were still molded into a naturally flowing conversation. We focused on areas the interviewee had special interest in so at times not all questions were answered, and I was also mindful of the interviewee’s times. My questions were originally centered around finding motivations, asking about stories of food insecurity, changes due to the pandemic, effects of gardening, social interaction, and eating OGC meals, inquiring about any suggestions they may have regarding food access strategies, and gauging engagement in programs. I have included portraits of the experiences and stories I witnessed as well as those shared to me in these interviews.

I have also used the methodology of content analysis, by looking at previously reported news stories, podcasts that Roman and Adriana have been on such as El Paso Food Voices by Dr. Meredith Abarca, previous and current grant documents, their websites, and social media
platforms to provide a more complete approach and view of the impact this organization has facilitated and help me analyze anything that I might missed in my experiences, surveys, and interviews. There are many people that not only support One Grub Community’s mission, but are inspired by it, and happily spread the word in the creative ways that they are able to; it is beneficial to capture these often-passionate expressions to tell the full story.

**Data Collection**

Data collection aside from my participatory research and volunteerism - for surveys and interviews - took place in September and October of 2020, and October is when cases began to surge in El Paso. Because of the need to socially distance during COVID-19, the process of collecting perspectives, thoughts, and ideas looked much different than I had originally planned. I originally had wanted to go door to door in the surrounding area where One Grub is located to let them know for one that they had a resource for food access walking distance if they ever needed or wanted to have a meal in return for some time volunteering and to ask them to participate in a neighborhood survey where I could gauge how the food desert that they are in was doing. The social distancing guidelines made this activity too high of a risk, so I decided to change my focus onto customers and volunteers that are already familiar with the cafe and/or garden. This shifted the overall focus of my work because when walking the neighborhood and speaking to people in that area I believe I would have been able to better understand how much of the area was aware of or taking advantage of the resources available down the street. Instead, I turned my focus and decided I wanted to learn about their current consumers and volunteers so that I could understand what the benefits are of volunteerism and community involvement with Planty for the People as well as how much their customers interact with these resources in terms
of donations, free meals, community events, etc. So, I decided to make the surveys available online instead of having hard copies of surveys that were given out at One Grub.

The interviews also ended up being online (one via phone call too) to accommodate for the pandemic guidelines of social distancing. This had similar pros and cons; I would have loved for the volunteer interviews to have taken place at the garden during Garden Days when everyone is volunteering, but of course, Garden Days stopped taking place in March, so I had to restructure them. Instead, I was able to talk to some long-time volunteers, Roman and Adriana, Estela - the horticulturist who led Garden Days, and a few long-time One Grub customers from a distance. I was also able to connect with a handful of people that I never previously met but keep up with the cafe and non-profit through social media. I relied on the rapport that I had previously built with the volunteers and was able to continue to build relationships as best we can via online interactions. There were also technical difficulties that posed further obstacles; for example, some older adults are not tech-savvy, and others have had issues with the screen making them dizzy. Zoom allowed the interviews to be recorded, but smartphone recordings were used as a backup plan to ensure there were not any technical difficulties, like the call not recording for some reason as often happens.

Data Processing & Analysis

To ensure this research is useful to Planty for the People, the founders and I have had various conversations about what kinds of data or information, as well as what applied work they may want or need. We also work with each other by listening to each other’s strengths which allows me to be at their service by helping with applied work like grant applications, strategic social media planning, marketing, etc. This in turn allows me to understand the organization and their needs to meet their mission so that this research is helpful to them in the end, while also
affecting change in applied ways for them. This is considered being community partners in engaged research.

Because of my CBPR approach, a large amount of my data comes from my field notes of close participation with the organization both before and during our community partner relationship. I have taken field notes of my participant observation and volunteer experiences over the last 11 months. To analyze survey results, I will use QuestionPro to see percentages, as well as code for themes in the responses of open-ended questions. In my analysis, I explore how volunteerism at Planty for the People is connected to fruit and vegetable intake, gardening activity, fruit and vegetable production at home, community involvement, or wellbeing. I also explore motivations behind guests visiting One Grub Community and gauge their awareness and participation of the organization’s programs and efforts. Regarding interview analysis, I have transcribed all interviews using www.otter.ai’s transcription services and have then coded the transcripts for themes which I have outlined in my results and discussion (chapter 5).

Examples of what I have produced working with the non-profit are available in Appendix 3. I have become what I see as a trusted confidant of Roman and Adriana since I have made an effort to show that I am here to help them and support their mission and I will uphold this relationship beyond my research timeline, as I cherish this partnership on a personal level and am honored to have the opportunity to work with them.

**Ethical Considerations**

Throughout this research, I have considered principles of research ethics as shared by the American Sociological and American Anthropological Associations as they relate to Community-Based Participatory Research. I am also aware of the principles of ethical research and engaged practice in the community as promoted by the APA (American Psychological
Association) and the Principles of Community Engaged Research (NIH). The most important ethical consideration for my community-based participatory research is that of informed consent to research and to record their voices and take their pictures or videotape interviews. Digital informed consent forms (via google forms) will be provided when signing up for interview time slots to promote transparency before officially agreeing to the interview. This form has my contact information available if at any point they feel uncomfortable or have any further questions. I do not foresee such issues, though, because the topic of this research should not bring about any sensitive information. Of course, the same considerations will be implemented for all interviews that will be done. All participants will be chosen without regard for any personal characteristics and solely based on their involvement with One Grub Community void of all discrimination.

The survey that I have given to customers will also have an informed consent paragraph on the first page, with similar general information about the research I am conducting with my email available for further questions or concerns. All survey data and audio recordings of the interviews will be stored safely in my private cloud storage and any identifying information will be destroyed at the completion of this research. All names will be left out or replaced by pseudonyms aside from the owners and Estela with their permission. All survey participants were offered the same incentives, which was a chance to win one of two (one for volunteers, the other for guests) $20 OGC Gift Certificates, sponsored by my committee chair, Dr. Nunez-Mchiri. Raffles were done and documented on Random Result Generator (randomresult.com) and screenshots receipts have been stored as well. Likewise, all interview participants were given the same incentives, which was $10 for their time as well as a complimentary garden bundle for each sponsored by Roman and Adriana; all receipts have been stored as well.
Incentives will be the same for all participants dependent upon the type of participation (survey or interview).

**Methodological Strengths and Weaknesses**

Burklow and Mills (2009) present information on the use of CBPR within underserved communities; they use CBPR to show how this methodology can increase understanding, genuine connections, and knowledge exchange between parties. This allows researchers to work alongside a team that is already truly knowledgeable about their own communities and social problems while giving them a voice and working together to improve their conditions (Burklow and Mills 2009). This is exactly what I believe to have accomplished; I have offered the skills I previously acquired and am learning from them as much as possible to help their mission of food sovereignty. Working together in this way has allowed me to document circumstances accurately, while really being of service to them in the ways that they need.

A limitation associated with this research is the fact that it is not necessarily appropriate to be of use for generalizations about food access and the border. To counter this, I urge for more research to be conducted in the future on healthy food access and community building in border regions through innovative means. Regardless, I believe that an ethnographic approach will be highly effective at communicating stories that surround the topic of food access. Many times, in everyday life, those who are far removed from the struggle of being food insecure are caught up in their own problems. Those problems have merit as well, but a narrative approach would be helpful in allowing them to step out of their own worlds and to consider the experiences of someone who is food insecure alongside people who are willing to help. Ethnographies and CBPR have been shown to be effective and needed in marginalized populations (such as the border) (Burklow and Mills 2009). The immersion that comes along with ethnography is
necessary for me to fully involve myself in this experience and will be a beneficial aspect of the research, as I anticipate being able to see interactions firsthand and therefore be able to communicate certain instances that may be left out through a survey or interview response, especially in highly emotional instances. Also, seeing experiences first-hand will allow me to rely on a more objective view of individuals instead of relying on less reliable self-reported data.

The pandemic has also influenced my decision to alter my research methods and approach. I was unable to survey community members within a 1-mile radius from the organization due to safe social distance considerations. I also became disconnected from many of the organization’s volunteers due to social distancing requirements and stay at home recommendations from our City and County health officials. I was unable to talk to people who had previously physically participated in volunteerism at Planty for the People for months, so the surveys and interviews suffered a bit in that sense. Additionally, I was unable to have face to face (in person) interviews and had to do them completely online instead. Both the virtual survey and interviews created a level of difficulty in reaching those who may not have internet access and/or involvement. I did want to have flyers that could be distributed at One Grub but after analyzing the risks of passing out more materials to people, we decided against it. One of the benefits of online communication, though, was that I got to reach out to customers and volunteers that I had never met or seen at the garden, so I was able to reach out to more of One Grub’s long-time customers that I never previously interacted with before. However, lack of face-to-face interaction was definitely an obstacle because it is just more difficult to establish a true connection through a screen because you miss things like nonverbal cues and other interactions that provide layers of connection that allow for trust or at least comfort. Finally, doing research online comes with the
possibility of technical difficulties of which I had my fair share. I do not believe this greatly impacted the quality of my results, but it is worth considering, nonetheless.

As with other social science research approaches, community-based participatory work does have setbacks, however; many have criticized ethnographies for being biased on the side of the ethnographer (LeCompte 1987). Many argue that this is part of the benefit of the research because it offers an insider perspective, and feminist scholars like Patti Lather (2003) even argue that the search of objectivity serves to mystify the nature of research and to “legitimate privileges based on class, race, and gender,” (Naples and Gurr 2013). Regardless, I have chosen to incorporate interviews and surveys, as well as content analysis, to offset possible bias so that participants can frame their experiences in other ways than through my lens. A mixed-methods approach helps to further strengthen my approach. The surveys and content analysis will allow a comprehensive account of the organization.
CHAPTER 5: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A Pre-Pandemic Timeline of Participatory Research

Throughout this collaborative research project, I pushed myself to go beyond my comfort zone. I first started to go to garden days by myself every week in the fall of 2019, which brought new friends and closer connections to people I had already met, and it seemed as though I soaked in more of the knowledge that Estela would pass on to us. In November of 2019, we began to sow the seeds of the winter crops, which included lettuces, spinach, kale, calendula, etc. Though it may seem minuscule, this small step is the key for people that have never grown their own food to simply begin. A lot of preparation goes into it, including having a space like a garden bed or container, to begin with, and acquiring and working with soil, the actual sowing of the seed is what it really takes to begin a process that is foreign for so many individuals, including myself at that time. The sowing of the seed is an activity that helps demystify gardening and growing our own food, so this process is valuable for volunteers to be a part of. The following weeks, those of us who were there when the seeds were sewn were able to see the progression of our green plants after weeks and weeks of watering up until the spring when we could harvest them.

Estela would take time from each of our garden sessions to do have teaching opportunities with the volunteers, and teach us things like how to propagate lemongrass, how to compost in beds to prep the soil for planting, specifically layer composting (or lasagna composting), which included letting the soil “rest” in between each turn. Having come from a family of curanderas or healers, she is extremely knowledgeable and ritualistic in her ways. Estela has a way of working in line with nature, and she takes her gardening practices to a spiritual level.
In early December of 2019, Roman and Adriana threw their El Paso Giving Day campaign kickoff fundraiser and asked for all the volunteers for their help running the event. It was an all-day event that would feature their delicious breakfast menu offering options like chilaquiles, chickpea omelets, and carrot lox bagels, garden tours, raffles of baskets filled with local goodies, a kids crafting table, Planty for the People produce for sale for the first time ever, and the beginnings of a mural that would be actively painted during the event; guests or local business owners had the option to sponsor a “square” of the mural and be able to write their business names. Garden volunteers had signed up previously to work each of these events for a morning or afternoon shift and helped with other things like making a menu for the produce, signs for each station, and more. At the end of the event, Roman and Adriana had planned a big announcement, where they would talk about the fundraising campaign that would allow for more garden beds to be planted, and more pay-it-forward meals to be sponsored, and new initiatives to begin like a slew of new free classes on different gardening topics or their brand-new pay-what-you-can produce sales. Towards the end of the event, a gentleman that worked for 3M spoke and announced that Planty for the People had won the 3M Foundation Community Vibrancy grant of $25,000 - the highest amount that a Non-Profit organization. “One day, what this organization is doing will have positive ripples across the whole country and even the world,” he said. Roman and Adriana expressed their gratitude for their volunteers primarily and all their guests for their support. It was clear that the little actions are taken every day that helped a few people every day were starting to be noticed on a new scale, which was resulting in a growing amount of community members being helped in new and old ways.

The new year began with hope and energy for the volunteers, and by this time we had built a core group of volunteers along with some who would visit more infrequently but were
consistent, nevertheless. We got to know each other closely and though we were all different, our bond started to form when we would eat together. There was someone who lived in Fort Bliss, a nearby army base, there was a girl who recently graduated from college, there was the mom who homeschooled her 6 children, and there was a girl in her mid-thirties that loved to travel and was trying to get a job abroad as a teacher.

As volunteers in the garden, we would order our food about 30 minutes before finishing our tasks in the garden, then we would come inside, put together two or three large round tables and all sit together, often splitting meals with each other that we had earned. Our sharing of this meal became a time that we could unwind even more so than in the garden, a place already relaxing to many, while we slowly savored each bite of our food. This kind of commensality, the communal sharing of food, is a near-universal social practice that creates bonds through the intimate act of eating together (Crowther 2018). Fischler (2011) has made the connection stating that “if eating a food makes one become more like that food, then those sharing the same food become more like each other”. This was indeed true for us volunteers; the more we ate with each other, the more we learned about each other’s hobbies, families, and careers, and the more we started branching on our bond and spending time with each other away from the garden too.

I was personally obsessed with the Mexican style breakfast plate that many of us El Pasoans know and love; we would have chilaquiles, chickpea scramble, hash browns or papitas, and charro beans. I have a hearty appetite so I would clean my plate before most of my fellow volunteers, but I had no shame in fully enjoying that meal since I had worked up an appetite working in the garden. This sentiment was based on the notion of reciprocity, the exchange of food at meals that creates ties between people and allows individuals to demonstrate their identity through performing social competence or fulfilling a social role (Crowther, 2018).
These exchanges can include gifts, but it also includes commercial transactions in which one person gives the gift of a prepared meal in return for a monetary value. When these social roles are shaken as they are through the pay-it-forward program, Roman and Adriana realize that it is hard for people to break down the stigma of taking without monetarily reciprocating.

As part of an effort to build trust and develop a stronger relationship with One Grub, I made a commitment in January 2020, to assist with the organizations’ advertising, marketing, or writing-related. I met with Adriana, who leads Planty for the People, along with two other volunteers, Paola and Alyssa, who had agreed to work on these kinds of tasks, and we began to meet every Thursday beginning in late January. We got to work on projects that would help Planty for the People get organized, communicate their programs and events, and help them attain more grant funding to expand programming and reach. We made a community calendar at OGC to showcase all the monthly events, designed and planned a newsletter that we could print and email out to everyone, and started an Instagram for Planty for the People to communicate our events to the public.

One Grub Community’s Instagram was already established and actively posted about food and the garden, so their existing platform helped us gain a wide reach quickly. We worked through February, slowly putting systems into place through shared spreadsheets that helped us keep track of event promotion and incorporating new projects like searching for grants and starting to write them.

In March of 2020, my research goals changed as a global pandemic has impacted the world, the US, and El Paso in the spring of 2020. When I proposed this research, we were quarantined at home, following a Stay-at-Home Order issued on March 24, 2020, for the city of El Paso. Roman and Adriana made the decision to cease operations of the cafe at that time,
however, they wanted to put the non-profit organization at the center of their focus to help people access healthy foods in a chaotic, stressful, and uncertain time where nutrition is even more important in terms of prevention. The pandemic has had and will continue to have many implications on the way that Planty for the People handles volunteerism and community engagement, and how One Grub Community feeds their community.

**Transformation and Effects of Pandemics on Social Volunteerism**

The pandemic has been a devastating period for the world and especially for the U.S. It has taken many lives, increased suicide rates, resulted in people losing their jobs, which resulted in higher food insecurity, and social norms to be redefined. For One Grub Community and Planty for the People, this has resulted in a cancellation or shift of any social, group events like garden days, yoga, cooking classes, gardening workshops, and sharing meals in the dining room; these activities were all crucial to what One Grub Community and Planty for the People meant to a lot of people, and the events for the year were just taking off. Roman recalled “all I know is that we had our busiest months in February and March. And our volunteer programs, the yoga stuff, and all those programs were starting, we were about to take off, we were gonna do the Vegetarian Society's dinner… but we had to go a different direction.” Adriana and Roman understood closing the cafe for some time needed to happen to protect the safety and wellbeing of staff, customers, and volunteers, which obviously resulted in the business suffering due to a decrease in sales.

To survive, Roman and Adriana put their energy towards applying for small business emergency funding from the state. For the Non-Profit, what ensued was a complete reframing of how volunteerism and community engagement will take place for this period, which has already lasted 10 months. As previously mentioned, the garden maintenance schedule changed to
include only pairs of volunteers at a time and each on a certain day of the week, and all other events were canceled. My partner and I had the responsibility to water every Sunday, which was a lot of work and our favorite day of the week. Additionally, the weekly meetings that Adriana, Paola, and Alyssa were having. Alyssa had never previously been involved as a garden volunteer, and when the pandemic hit, she chose to bow out of our volunteer group. Adriana, Paola, and I decided to start having our meetings online. Instead of focusing on community events and communication, we turned our focus to applying for grants to help the garden grow in the ways we could for the moment.

As a part of our academic-community partnership, we applied in May for the El Paso Country Healthy Food Financing Initiative which was looking to support conservation efforts and gardens in low-income areas are applying for garden expansion funds, a rainwater harvesting system, and a pollinator habitat and ended up receiving the grant to be put towards a new irrigation system, a high tunnel, and a water catchment system to help with sustainability. All these initiatives will be implemented in 2021 and will help the garden run more efficiently thereby producing more food that can be sold at pay-what-you-can rates.

In April of 2020, everything had shut down, grocery stores were experiencing shortages, and the fall/winter garden was at peak harvest time and had 40+ beds full of greens, roots, herbs, and medicinal flowers that were ready to be consumed. Roman and Adriana decided the best thing to do at this point would be to take time to harvest all the produce and package into produce boxes and then offer them to the community via contactless delivery, facilitated by delivery drivers, to avoid waste and contact with people. To do this, a small group of volunteers including Roman and Adriana harvested the rest of the winter garden crops and put together produce boxes, which include tons of dark, leafy greens that are both nutritionally dense and
were abundant at that time after winter crops were harvested. The boxes were offered to the community at costs as low as free, with no questions asked, and delivered to their doorsteps free of charge with the help of a separate volunteer team (including myself).

The impact of this produce box program was remarkable; people who were in vulnerable positions and having trouble feeding themselves and/or their families, had the opportunity to get as low as free and consisted of a $20 value/suggested donation for organic, non-GMO, local produce including some of the most nutritionally dense foods on the planet that are packed with immune-fortifying elements. Their delivery system made it so that volunteer drivers delivered in the general area of town that they live in, and they also made possible for all people in El Paso metroplex to get access to these produce boxes; most delivery services only delivered within the loop and left out margins of El Paso that have colonias which are known underserved neighborhoods. They took this into consideration after I told them my experience living in said margins and made this delivery available to all.

As an academic partner, I was also able to help put together a 2-page pdf (Appendix 3) that includes all the vegetables, herbs, roots, and flowers that are included in the produce boxes, with photos to help identify each one, as well as the benefits, uses of them, and recipe ideas. The document was available through a scannable QR code that was printed in every box; various people let us know on Instagram that they appreciated the informational component to identify all the vegetables and learn how they can use them, making them less likely to go to waste. In addition, I have shared gardening tips and other related content that can help anyone at home on Instagram.

Bauer et al. (2020) has shown that the rate of food insecurity for households with children has doubled from 2018 to now. Adriana and Roman realized this, they wanted to focus on how
they could help those who needed it most, which was growing the garden and planting more beds than ever before. After the produce boxes were delivered and new spring/summer crops were planted, they decided to offer their garden grown produce a la carte through the organization at a pay-what-you-can rate, focusing on social media presence, and applying for grant funding, as previously mentioned. They first reached out to many of the volunteers they were in contact with to offer them produce in case they were struggling financially. Inspired by the success of the produce boxes and the positive feedback they received, Roman and Adriana, myself, and Paola brainstormed about what else could be done to help with the food insecurity that has been climbing, evident by the extremely long lines at the foodbanks. Roman and Adriana had plans to have cooking classes virtually and send out tool kits that would supplement the classes beforehand, as well as a similar initiative for gardening classes or support hours to help continue the network we had built up. We talked about the importance of creating gardening networks, and finding new, virtual ways that we could all continue to connect so that we can share recipes, gardening tips, even if just to say hello.

As part of my contributions, I assisted in implementing a Facebook group that helps connect the volunteers and facilitates communication during this time and it helped us all stay connected with people we were not previously virtually connected with. Additionally, Adriana allowed me to help with their Planty for the People Instagram, where I was able to curate and post simple gardening tips, share recipes from the community using our produce, post pictures of the garden from our Sunday watering day, and allow organizations to reach out for partnerships or people to reach out to us when they wanted to volunteer, or had questions about their gardens or produce. This made possible virtual community building and support in a time when it is needed since physically coming together was discouraged. Though the pandemic has made
The first week that I was able to return to the garden in person, which was in mid-May, I saw the new vegetables being planted and was shocked at how much it was thriving. Adriana said for some time, the weeds got out of hand, but by the time mid-May came around, the garden had more beds going than ever before. It looked so beautiful and bright with many sunflowers (3 beds), various kinds of peppers such as jalapenos, Chinese peppers, and Jimmy Nardello peppers, tomatoes, black corn, garlic, ashwagandha, epazote, celery, grapes, and more. The trees were huge, especially the fig trees which provided a lot of shade despite being dwarf trees. The pomegranate trees and cacti were also thriving, the mint never stopped growing in the garden, the basil was blooming and creating huge leaves. The following is an excerpt from my field notes about our first day back to the garden during the pandemic, May 17th, 2020:

_Thomas and I were finally added to the watering schedule and started to be able to take our turn on Sundays, specifically the 17th. Thomas cut the grass on this day and we brought Sky, our hammock, and just made a day of it. We had not gone anywhere since the start of this quarantine, so it was exciting to be able to go into this therapeutic green garden that was full of life and have it all to ourselves. For introverts like myself (and Thomas), this is really a dream come true. The garden took about two hours to water, and it took Thomas about an hour and a half to cut the grass. Our daughter, Sky, played on the playground that no one else had been using at the time, which was another amazing benefit we had. She is starting to become much more involved in helping us water, and now spends about 15 minutes watering and takes breaks to play. We also brought food and picked up doughnuts and coffee that we ate in the garden. That first day especially was one of the most relaxing days we had since mid-March._

There was so much life in the garden that calmed us every time and had us in awe of what the Earth can grow from dirt, water, and seeds. I cannot say that growing food is this simple, it takes many hours of watering and daily adherence to the plants, observation, trial, and error, and working the soil, which involves many trips and tricks. We learned this for ourselves and gained a new appreciation for the 48 beds that are going at the PFTP gardens, when we...
started our home garden this spring. We started with tomatoes, basil, lima beans, strawberries, lemon balm, serrano peppers, rosemary, sage, pumpkins, squash, sunflowers, and cactus. We are currently growing types of kale, spinach, lettuces, radishes, carrots, beets, and broccoli during these cold months. We were quickly humbled when our strawberries stopped producing as soon as June hit in the hot El paso heat and realized how finicky our plants were here in Sun City. We did not have huge yields overall, but it was a learning experience that we were able to do with the support of Roman, Adriana, and Estela. They have answered our questions, had phone calls, sent us product recommendations, given us seeds, and most importantly, given us the hands-on experience of working in the garden. This really helped to demystify this process and helped us spend less on groceries for weeks.

Several of us garden volunteers started our own gardens at home during the pandemic. Most of the volunteers who were regulars at the garden ceased to attend any kind of volunteer events post-pandemic and moved their gardening practices to their homes. A few of them took everything they had been learning and practicing at the PFTP garden and started home gardens. “[One volunteer] went ‘full COVID,’ stayed home with her grandbaby, and just turned into a garden mama. She totally applied herself, turned her backyard into this haven, and has been having an abundance of food for her little vegan family,” Roman says. The photos this volunteer has shared on social media shows her with a yard full of greenery and squashes, watermelons, and pomegranates that she grew at home. A lot of the regulars also reach out to Roman, Adriana, or Estela with questions about how to go about solving certain issues in their home gardens. There were plans to create networks of previous volunteers through a social media page, but with such upheaval, the connections from volunteer to volunteer have somewhat diminished.
As more time passed during the COVID-19 pandemic, Roman and Adriana noticed it seemed like something unlocked in the community’s minds that helped them to realize how important community efforts toward food access are, perhaps from the effects of grocery shortage, which many of us have not experienced in our lifetimes. “All of a sudden, something clicked,” Roman explains. “People were like ‘oh produce from the community for the community’”. Consequently, they have seen many more people paying it forward who are able to do so, they focused on growing foods and getting grants, and the non-profit development has really benefited. “It's what needed to happen for the little nonprofit, finally,” Roman says. “Adriana has been working so hard on so much behind the scenes and it’s nice to see it at the point where it’s at now. And all the while we had to run the restaurant and survive.”

When COVID-19 case numbers began to decline in the summer, they decided the best way to continue volunteerism in the garden was to hold socially distanced small groups of no more than 4 volunteers at a time. Estela also decided to no longer volunteer since the groups were not meeting and she was needing to focus on bringing in income at this uncertain time. But at Planty for the People, the new volunteer program was “creating its own structure,” Roman says. He harps on letting things happen and respecting the flow of things as the new volunteer ways were created. “It’s a slower process getting to know somebody because you have to distance, you have to work outside. So, if/when they choose to come back, we get to know them.” New and old volunteers were getting into new grooves and various new volunteers became regulars; there was a new volunteer who was in high school and was part of a Girl Scouts apprentice, so she would show up multiple times a week, learn about gardening, take notes, and go back and report to her troop. There was another volunteer who loved to do challenging work and would “run through the garden and crush it” as Roman puts it when he
would volunteer; he came with his own knowledge of gardening since he grew up with it, but he did not have the room to garden in his apartment living situation. Roman describes him as their “religious Thursday guy” and expressed that he was so used to his routine that when it was thrown off, he felt something missing; this consistency is something that Roman appreciates and said he loves to hear. The garden provided an outlet for him and his knowledge was also an asset to Roman and Adriana.

Roman and Adriana mentioned how the experience at the garden for volunteers drastically changed from being one of socializing with a group of around 15-25 people depending on the week, to one of introspection and calmness. This is what I experienced, and for the time being it was needed and proved to have its own benefits for me because I was still able to go (and I recognize there are various others who did not have this privilege). As mentioned, Roman and Adriana noticed that it was a bit harder to get to know volunteers, but in other senses, returning volunteers during the pandemic built a closer relationship with Roman and Adriana than was possible before. “It can be way deeper, and something that's more personal,” Roman says about the new volunteer structure. “I give it space to breathe because I don't want to intrude on people. But sometimes in those moments, people really share.”

The pandemic has not only taken an unprecedented number of lives caused an economic crash, both of which have affected low-income non-white families disproportionately (Bauer et al., 2020). Community gardens in such communities work to offset this by providing adequate food, especially fresh foods, and to continue to teach people how to garden where and when possible for the people who have realized how insecure our food system is and are willing and able to start the journey to grow some of their own food but may not know where to start. For those who cannot afford to because of time, money, or lack of space; the community garden and
pay-it-forward program serve as an emergency net. The organization is indeed still serving pay it forward meals, providing produce as low as free, and they had produce boxes delivered at the height of food shortage. On top of this, the garden can help keep people’s stress levels at a manageable level through both nutrition and the physical experience that can work as therapy as previously discussed. Even though it was a challenge to put so much energy into the organization and food access initiatives while their business was losing clientele volume, it has been a fruitful effort for everyone involved and has been all about doing what they can give where they are and listening to guests and volunteers to figure out how they can best serve everyone.

Roman and Adriana have chosen to look at the positives and continue to adapt to the times. “There's a lot of negative junk and there's a lot of closed stuff, but there's a lot of opening of minds and hearts and stuff,” Roman says. “If the old lady across the street can get down on some of your zucchini that you grew, and she doesn't have to walk far from it. And she only had two bucks in her pocket, and she left with a big handful of veggies. Then I think we've done our job.” It is the little things like this that really help measure success for Roman and Adriana and help put their efforts in perspective.

The One Grub Experience: Guest Interview and Survey Results

I was able to have 4 virtual interviews with guests in October of 2020 and surveyed 22 via an online survey administered from mid-September to late October. The One Grub Community guest experience has undoubtedly gone through a major transformation in 2020 due to the pandemic social distancing guidelines and the ensuing closure of the One Grub Community dining room, offering pick-up only, in the spring of this year. The economic consequences of the pandemic have also caused a downturn in their business, and though their
small business is relatively new, One Grub’s longtime guests have continued to support; 52% of survey respondents have been patrons of the cafe for more than one year, with 24% saying that they have been with One Grub for more than 2 years since they were a food truck (N = 22).

Analysis of the guest survey data shows longer time as a customer is associated with greater awareness of their educational, community, and gardening events (chi square = 10.4, p.<.224)

It is the business’ food justice mission, delicious, healthy, vegan food, and their friendly staff and environment that keeps guests coming back; when asked about what motivated the respondents to be a patron of One Grub Community’s, the most common response (mentioned a total of 14 times) was OGC’s food sovereignty mission and their community empowerment component - as one guest said, “it’s a business with heart and soul”. Most of the guests had a combination of a few of their top factors in this short answer question; one guest said their reason for their support was “delicious healthy food plus the help provided to the community such as teaching people to garden, pay it forward meals, and low cost locally grown vegetables/fruit;” another’s was “not only the great food but the fact that the food is nutritious and plant-based. I also love their pay it toward the program. It’s motivating to know there’s food from a garden and I’m contributing to a program that helps others.”

Their responses show that their 3-pronged approach involved in Roman and Adriana’s social entrepreneurship - healthy food access based on dietary needs that are not mainstream (vegan food, gluten-free options, etc.), pay-it-forward programs that actively help those who are hungry, and the creation of community through educational programs, community gardening, and other events that help the community’s wellbeing such as yoga - is what keeps them coming back. All the programs work together to make a well-rounded approach that helps the community while providing a sense of fulfillment to customers in both the fact that their food is
delicious, healthy, and vegan, but also that their money is going towards social good. Into social good. Some of the customers suggested how the intention behind the food (i.e., social and food justice) adds another layer of pleasure to the food itself. Others said what kept them back was simply “all of the plant-based goodness.” A breakdown of other reasons guests has chosen to be consistent patrons of OGC’s is below.

![Motivation to be OGC Patrons](image)

**Figure 7: Motivation to be OGC patrons – N = 22**

Most of the guests that I surveyed (37.5 %) initially learned about One Grub via social media marketing, with the next most popular way of learning about them being friends and family, then the farmer’s market (N = 22). Additionally, 72% of their customer base was from El Paso, and they were exceptionally aware of the programs and their food justice mission (N = 22). All respondents were aware of Planty for the People’s existence, while 91% said they were aware of the educational, gardening, and community events that took place before the pandemic (N = 22). Their involvement rates in their Pay-It-Forward program were also high, with almost half of respondents having bought a Pay-It-Forward coin, 56% have purchased produce from the
non-profit, and 23% had referred someone to have a free meal through the pay-it-forward program (N = 22).

The guests I survey were not simply patrons who would only purchase food from the cafe, they were also involved in other events they have participated in or held. Half of all respondents said they had visited them at the Downtown Arts and Farmer’s market - their participation definitely had positive consequences that allowed their cafe business to flourish. Cooking classes offered by One Grub Community were another popular event that 13% of guests said they had participated in. Gardening workshops in partnership with other local organizations, garden Wednesdays, and campaign announcement day were also mentioned as events that respondents have been a part of.

When it comes to their plant-based menu and dietary preferences, 59% of guests said they had specific dietary preferences - of these, 65% were plant-based diets, 14% were allergy specific diets, 14% were gluten-free, and 7% mentioned healthy/organic food preferences. In a cross-tabulation analysis of customers who have dietary preferences and their relation to satisfaction with food, of those who did not have dietary preferences or needs, 77% said they were very satisfied, as compared to those who do have dietary preferences of which 92% were very satisfied (chi square = .95, p.<.92, N= 22). Additionally, those who had dietary preferences were 8% more likely to travel 25 miles or more to get to One Grub Community (chi square = 1.18, p.<.882, N=22). Though their vegan menu plays a large part in why people choose to support One Grub, it also seems to not deter others who are unfamiliar with the diet and allows for people with other dietary needs to enjoy both Mexican cuisine and cuisines from other places as adapted by Roman thanks to their revolving weekly menu. However, the plant-based menu
does attract a wider range of patrons from potentially farther parts of town and satisfies this subset of the population who may not have many options to dine outside of their homes.

The four qualitative interviews I conducted helped delve a bit deeper into some of the opinions and motivations held by OGC customers. There were a few themes that stuck out, including general ambiguity about the ins and outs of the Pay-It-Forward program, the benefits of their plant-based menu, and suggestions on how to reach more people with their initiatives. A lot of the guests that I spoke with expressed an interest in gardening, plants, and volunteering but have had to hold off because of the pandemic. Linda says she will be retiring soon and will finally have the time to learn how to garden as a hobby. Fay was planning to start a gardening course that was offered in March before it was canceled but has not been to the cafe since the pandemic because she has not been in the area.

An emergent theme within the interviews was confusion about the pay-it-forward program. They did know the gist of the program, but they were a bit confused about how the pay-it-forward coin worked, and 3 out of 4 of them expressed that they would instead just leave a tip since they knew all tips go toward this program. Many of them mentioned how their social media presence was above and beyond and provided a personal connection because of Roman’s garden check-ins that provide business updates, the consistent posts, and the menu updates -- but they realized they could work on providing a thorough explanation about the pay-it-forward program. There was however, one interviewee who was aware of how the program worked and has previously referred someone who was homeless at the time to go volunteer and get their free meal at One Grub.

All the customers also mentioned the pleasure and good taste of the food, even if they were not previously familiar with plant-based foods at all like Carla. Carla’s friend was dairy
intolerant and loved One Grub’s food, so she had them cater the food at her baby shower. At first, Carla was hesitant and unwilling to try the food when she heard it was plant-based, but she was convinced by the smell and presentation of the food to try it. When she tried some of the chips and plant-based queso, she was pleasantly surprised that it tasted good. She began to visit the cafe every few weeks after this event. As a high school teacher who is also the president of her school’s environmental club, Carla was pleased to learn more about their community garden and programs that help people access healthy foods. She has asked Roman and Adriana to visit the school once the pandemic is over to talk about their experience and their garden, to inspire her students to start gardens of their own; and to help her establish a school garden that the students could all tend to for anyone who does not have the ability to start their own garden outside school.

Like Carla, Linda also was not familiar with plant-based cuisine, but her mind was opened to it by her doctor; in an interview, she said, “now as I'm getting older, with some of my health conditions, my doctor has recommended possibly switching to a plant-based diet.” She too recalls trying it and being surprised by how good the first meal she had at OGC was and expresses how it helped her familiarize herself with this very distant lifestyle to her and helped her include more plant-based meals in her diet for the sake of her health. Fay also was interested in switching to a plant-based diet from her current pescatarian, but she was influenced by her fellow college friends whom she says a lot of are vegan. Elena, who has eaten a “near plant-based diet” for the last few years, loves the food as well, and says “the carrot lox is life, and I don’t even like carrots!” Elena loves the convenience of having these plant-based foods readily made and expressed gratitude for the break her visits to OGC provide in cooking. “I could make my own seitan at home, but it’s just nice to be able to pick it up at One Grub sometimes,” she
says; just like omnivores may pick up premade or ready to heat meat or sides, herbivores like having the option to do so as well on busy days, and OGC provides that.

Elena has been a customer of OGC’s since the beginning as she met Roman at Mustard Seed mentioned that she feels like the traditional volunteering that is offered is not the only way to help; she suggested that passing out flyers to local shelters and Non-Profit organizations that help the homeless or doing online marketing on Facebook groups would be a great way to help more people who are in need. Carla suggested having pop-ups with other organizations and passing out flyers to local businesses when the pandemic is over to grow their reach. Linda also suggested having pop-ups, including pop-up classes, as she feels that OGC needs more local promotion as well.

**Contributions, benefits, and Challenges of Volunteerism at Planty for the People**

My survey reached 15 current and present volunteers, and I was able to interview 3 volunteers, which was a challenge after losing touch with most of the volunteers after the pandemic. I was already in touch with most of the core group, but a lot of the volunteers were older or were disabled and did not have means of communicating. Additionally, many of the volunteers did not return to any kind of volunteering after March, so talking to people about something that had not happened in many stressful, energy-draining months of lockdowns and strict guidelines was hard. Despite the challenging and unique situation, I was able to speak with key informants and delve into how volunteering at the garden and with Roman and Adriana, in general, proved to have rippling benefits for most of the volunteers. Among the benefits are relaxation to grow your own food, bonding with family, and even a mechanism of homeschool to teach children ab, spending time in nature, connecting with the community, and making genuine human connections, being taught community outreach and growing foods. There are also
challenges, spaces to improve and identifying them with the help of the volunteers themselves helps the organization address them and be able to help more people and/or spread awareness of what they can do.

Half of the volunteer survey respondents have been volunteers for more than one year, while 39% were new volunteers within the previous 0 to 3 months; the remaining 11% were somewhere in between. Most of the respondents seemed to have initially learned about One Grub originally from Instagram, though a few were friends with Roman and Adriana and others were introduced because of other non-profit organizations, like El Jardin breastfeeding garden, an organization that provides support to moms of infants that operates in the same building as OGC. Many of the mothers who participated in their weekly meeting, or the ‘Music with Maria’ event that they put on every Friday, prior to the pandemic would support OGC by purchasing a meal, while they were there, and some that have struggled financially were able to participate in their pay-it-forward program and get a free meal for their families when they otherwise would not be able to. Some respondents were specifically looking for vegan restaurants when they happened to find One Grub Community - one volunteer says, “I looked for vegan restaurants near me on an app called Happy Cow one time I was downtown [when I found them]. I found it odd and interesting that a restaurant was operating inside a church space- that morning I was greeted with lots of love and immediately was welcomed as if I were family; after eating, I was introduced to the volunteers and continued to go since.” Respondents were drawn to volunteering with the organization for a variety of reasons, with the most popular being a desire to learn how to grow their own food; a breakdown of motivations to volunteer with PFTP is shown in Figure 8 below.
Regarding measuring the benefits of volunteering, all the respondents agreed that their time volunteering taught them how to garden and/or grow their own food, allowed them to make genuine friendship connections, helped relax them and was like therapy, and helped them feel more connected with their community. When it came to being taught how to grow food and/or garden, 57% said they strongly agreed that they learned how to do so. Further analysis showed of those who strongly agreed that before their volunteerism at Planty for the People, they were interested in gardening but wanted to learn more, 60% said strongly agreed that they were inspired to start a garden at home as a result of volunteering (chi square = 12.71, p.<.694, N = 13). Eighty percent of respondents strongly agreed that they made genuine, special connections with friends. Seventy-one percent said they strongly agree that they felt more connected with their community after volunteering, and 85.7% of those who volunteered for 12 or more months strongly agreed that they were more connected with their community after doing so, which was a
higher percentage than that of those who had volunteered for a shorter time span (chi square = 12.71, p.<.694, N = 13). A breakdown of perceptions of benefits is provided in the chart below.

![Perception of Benefits of Volunteering for PFTP](chart)

**Figure 9: Perception of Benefits of Volunteering for Planty for the People, N =15**

The benefit of volunteering that was rated the highest was making genuine connections, which is connected to the idea of commensality or sharing a meal. Crowther (2018) describes commensality as “the act of companionable eating with other people.” The spaces where meals take place are also telling of social distance, which before the pandemic could be defined as how socially close people are to one another; in some cultures, eating together is a very intimate act that is only done with close family or partners (Crowther 2018). During garden days, sharing a meal with other volunteers after working and socializing in the garden is a way that bonds and friendships have been solidified. The garden is where people first meet and might chat if they are in the same area of the garden, but some people might be farther away from you or you may be too busy learning or working to really bond; but when you put everything aside and enjoy food that you worked for in a table of all volunteers, it brings a sense of camaraderie and friendships are much more likely to form. One of the volunteers I interviewed told me:
It was nice to work and then have the communal experience with everybody eating together and learning a little bit more [about each other] ... I would always leave later than planned. I would have to force myself to leave there. We’d just keep talking and then I’d realize an hour and a half had passed… I don't know how they foster this community and how they manage to bring all these great people. But it's definitely a communal thing. It's going to make you connect with others. (Volunteer Interview)

Not to mention, the food is delicious and puts people in a good mood; she continued to say “I have to admit, I'm not a vegan. But there is some that - I don't know how Roman it does but he makes these recipes that are amazing. And I do feel very healthy there, which is great.” This social connection over food is one that is hardly possible during the pandemic and was very impactful and one of the biggest missing components or benefits that Planty for the People and other similar organizations are having trouble creating during this time.

When asked about their overall experiences volunteering, respondents were open about how positive of an experience their volunteerism has been for them. One respondent said, “my experiences there have added to my personal growth! The hands-on and interaction with nature is wholesome, educational, and healing.” Others used words like wonderful, relaxing, and welcoming, and added “it's been an outlet to relieve stress during this stressful year.” Roman and Adriana’s responsiveness and adaptation to suggestions were also praised - “They are wonderful people with a noble cause. Always friendly and understanding and Always willing to open their doors and kitchen to those in need. They care about their customers and helpers and try to always listen and develop from feedback and experiences. And the food is bomb of course!”
The survey also showed that 85% of volunteer respondents have seen an instance where someone who was food insecure was fed, whether that person was their self or not (N = 22). Though a slightly higher percentage of OGC guests purchased produce from Planty for the People, twice the percentage of volunteers – 54% – told someone who was food insecure in their lives about the pay-it-forward program (N = 22). This shows that volunteers may either have more connections with those who are in need or are more familiar with the program and therefore spread awareness about it. Additionally, 47% purchased Pay-It-Forward coins and only 7% had confusion about what the coins were (N = 22).

**Traditional Environmental Knowledge: Healing, Rituals, and Coexistence with the Earth**

A key part of the experience of being taught how to garden was the volunteer horticulturist, Estela, who was our leader and teacher in the garden. She initially began collaborating with Roman and Adriana because of family connections and it turned out to be a perfect fit. I was able to talk with her in September to interview her about her experiences gardening and at Planty for the People. Estela is someone who has grown up around plants and gardening her whole life. As I mentioned previously, she comes from a family of *curanderas* or healers, so a lot of her knowledge of growing plants relates to healing and nourishment as well as ancestral, maternal knowledge. Estela has rituals related to gardening like gratitude prayers and meditating in her own garden at home, as well as rituals involving soil preparation. The rituals stem from setting positive intentions and being mindful. Estela says, “I do a lot of gratitude prayer in my garden, I do that before I even begin to garden. I do it when I do soil preparation. It grounds me 100% and connects me to the earth. I can't explain that.” She also describes herself as the nosy gardening lady who is always checking her plants and says “even when I worked, and I know some don’t have this luxury, but I would get up like at five in the morning. And I
would be out there as soon as the light was out, checking my plants and, you know, pulling bugs that didn't belong there. I think that's kind of like a ritual that I have.”

Estela’s professional and traditional environmental knowledge creates a link between the volunteering program at Planty for the People and creating an autonomous and decolonized food system, a movement commonly referred to as food sovereignty that has risen in the U.S. for years. Guillen (2007) reminds us how creating an autonomous, decolonized food system is about “building up and caring for soils that nurses all seeds to sprout... It is not measured by profit but by the health of all Earth’s communities” including the water, soils, animals, the people who produce, transport, distribute and consume the food. It is about respect to food and all it encompasses as food is a human right and absolute base necessity. This view rejects capitalism and exploitation of profit, and instead creates a new system, very much like Planty for the People and One Grub Community along with every volunteer, patron, donor, and partnering organizations created.

For the first year of their operations, Estela’s involvement was an integral aspect of making this sovereign food system successful, because it involves respecting traditional environmental knowledge or TEK held by indigenous peoples. Though our colonized institution will suppress this knowledge and tell us there is no value to it, we must realize that this is because indigenous peoples are seen through the colonized lens as “uncivilized and bloodthirsty.” Valdovinos (2017) connects this perspective to internalized racism and self-hatred of where we really come from. Valdovinos’ (2017) work as an indigenous afro-mestiza woman who strives to reclaim traditional environmental knowledge (TEK) as a means of creating mental resilience, health, and living in harmony with the land, for indigenous peoples and for all, shows that the stories and legends she was told by her elders held value and taught her how to respect
the Earth and every part of it. Estela’s ability to pass on the knowledge, these cultural heirlooms, that her grandmother and mother taught her is invaluable in creating food sovereignty in the community. Estela would sprinkle in the knowledge of her ancestors by telling us the healing properties of the herbs and plants in the garden, like when she did a mini lesson on lemongrass and how to propagate it and made sure to tell us the medicinal benefits of it, like how it can be pain-relieving and even lower cholesterol over long term use. She would encourage us to respect the Earth by showing us ways that we could upcycle or turn old ‘trash’ into items like pots or makeshift garden beds. Notably, a lot of what Estela taught us volunteers was embedded in the conversations we would have about non-gardening related topics over our communal lunch. Health, rituals, and working respectfully with nature were all topics that we would discuss over lunch, and they not only helped us bond and understand each other, but they helped us tap into the wealth of knowledge held by many of our elders and ancestors. Our experience here reinforces Valdovinos’ claim that traditional environmental knowledge is passed down by elders in ‘huertos familiares’ or familiar spaces, usually community gardens, that become empowering spaces for marginalized populations (2017).

**Garden Schooling: community outreach and the cultivation of knowledge**

The garden was also a space for learning of all kinds to take place. When discussing their overall experience volunteering, Natalia talked about how Estela impacted her and her family during their time volunteering:

> Sweet Stella also being a grandma and mother is so patient, devoted, and welcoming!

Learning about seasonal fruits and vegetables, composting, layering, and preparing the soil, planting seeds, and harvesting with her was like learning from their grandma. She is so passionate and excited to share her knowledge which is motivation for my children to learn
and dig in. We have gained so much experience with knowledge which is so key to why we homeschool. (Volunteer Survey)

Estela definitely had maternal experiences and qualities that made for an easy bond between children who attended the garden. She gave enough responsibility to the kids without expecting too much, making it easy for the kids to help as much as they are comfortable with. When I first started volunteering, I was given the task of cleaning up weeds in the garden and cutting down old, dead stems from the plants, and I was working with 2 of Natalia’s children and was impressed with how on task and efficient the children were. Their hands-on participation over the weeks they had been attending garden days had removed any fear, if they even had any, of getting their hands dirty and helping in the garden. Natalia also liked how her children were able to socialize with people from all generations, backgrounds, and areas of town. “Our children are conversing with college students, business owners, community leaders, and connecting with all to enjoy and serve one another while learning,” she says. Garden days proved to be a rich educational and social experience for her children that was free, served a communal purpose, and her family was even able to get a meal in return for their work, or as she calls it, a treat of purpose. Natalia continues explaining how garden days was a wholesome homeschool experience for her children:

We don’t eat out much because home cooking is a part of our home economics, math, and science. However, my children understand the reward of service in not just the process of the gardening experience but how it serves the community in One Grub and experience on their own plate too. We practice a plant-based lifestyle, so this is a blessing with wanting to teach our children being wholesome in their health and self-sufficiency. Our children are
comfortable enough to go up and order their own food which trains them in accountability in their independence in the community. (Volunteer Survey)

Overall, Natalia expressed her appreciation for this family experience. “It’s a wonderful training ground that is family-friendly because we are all like a family,” she says. “We all sit and eat or converse with one another, it is so beautiful to be a part of!”

In the southwest United States, many people have a misconception that it is near impossible to grow foods, however, “you can garden just about anything you want in El Paso and in the Southwest,” Estela says. “Our people think our soil is awful, but our soil it’s actually filled with a lot of minerals. The trick of that is knowing when to plant.” This is something great about the Planty for the People garden; volunteers and visitors can see examples of what grows here at what season, especially when the person is consistently there. In my time going I learned for the first time that vegetables like greens, squash, and roots prefer the cold and the summer is time for veggies like fruits, chili peppers, beans, and tomatoes. I asked Estela what advice she had for anyone who wanted to start to grow their own foods, and she would recommend simply starting. She says, “I mean, really just start, go buy some seeds and just start… maybe read up a little bit of education but you know, get a little patch of soil and just start.” Which goes hand in hand with her process of trial and error. Like Adriana, Estela stressed the importance of having to adapt and really observing your plants to be able to successfully make it to harvest.

The process of learning in and from the experience of gardening was not limited to just the children, though; many participants cited learning to grow your own food or garden as one of the motivations for going as well as an outcome. About 46% of respondents said they were familiar with gardening before garden days, and 20% were unfamiliar, with 7% of those being completely unfamiliar (N = 15). After their time volunteering, 80% said they now spend more time
gardening and only 8% of all respondents were not inspired to start gardening at home more after garden days (N = 15). Further, 57% of respondents strongly agreed that their time volunteering taught them enough of how to grow their own food. (N = 15). One respondent said, “everyone is always super welcoming, and I really loved learning more about gardening and small-scale horticulture. I got to be in nature, make friends, and eat delicious meals at the restaurant part of OGC.” Planty for the People is unique in that most people cannot otherwise name a place you can go that teaches you hands-on gardening for free and then feeds you afterward; as Adriana puts it “it’s usually, you watch this video, you watch, or you watch this demo, but to actually go out there and work it with yourself - it just really reiterates the learning process, you know, you get the audio, and you get the hands-on and it just kind of really makes things sink in.”

**Blooming Along with the Garden: Therapeutic Benefits**

A prominent theme that I observed throughout interviews, surveys, and in-person was the garden as a therapeutic space. As we discussed in the literature review, gardens are known for their healing properties that date back to the middle ages (Sokolovsky 2010). They have been shown to improve psychological mood, stress, and act as peaceful spaces where people are mentally and physically healed (Sokolovsky 2010). These qualities were brought up throughout my involvement and research. In the spring of 2020, Roman and Adriana decided to cease operations for the cafe as well as all group gardening, so a few volunteers split up the days amongst ourselves and Roman and Adriana allowing us to come with our partner or some came in pairs but socially distanced. My partner Thomas and I oversaw watering the gardens on Sundays. It quickly became our favorite day of the week and we were lucky enough to be able to bring our daughter and use the playground and small table and chairs to eat our breakfast out
there. It was an otherwise incredibly stressful summer on a larger scale, with a pandemic in full force causing social isolation and civic unrest from violent, racist acts.

Volunteers cited the importance of being able to unplug from the stress was an understated privilege that truly helped to stay sane and manage my stress. Other volunteers had similar experiences, and when we could still get together, I recall a few volunteers using the term “garden high” while we were eating to describe how good they felt after making that natural connection. In the volunteer survey, one respondent wrote “I love the high I get from working outside with the earth. I loved meeting many new people and making friends. It was always such a healing experience.”

Gardens are often referred to in Sweden as “healing gardens,” “restorative gardens,” or to being in the garden as “garden therapy,” where a study was done on the value in extending the meaning of health to include our surroundings (Adevi and Mårtensson 2013). Adevi and Mårtensson (2013) note 4 different dimensions of gardens as therapeutic spaces that help cure stress: “(1) the beauty of nature with seasonal changes and a multitude of life-forms which fascinates, relaxes and puts worries in life into perspective; (2) the dependence on nature and the cultivation of it, supporting the ecosystems of the planet; (3) the nurturing of plants and attendance to their growth, which creates a feeling of affinity with nature; (4) achieving contiguity with other people through the sharing of experiences such as cultivation and harvesting.” The five participants in this study exhibited increased physical and mental wellbeing, positive sensory experiences, and along with more traditional therapies, a relief of stress symptoms (Adevi and Mårtensson 2013). The Planty for the People garden exhibited this to a certain extent especially when it is a prolonged, consistent experience.
Besides being a therapeutic space, the garden also provides the opportunity for those who are disabled to be in a social space that provides interaction and support while providing a sense of fulfillment for work that they can put in here. Two students from a local high school who have learning disabilities connected with the organization around the fall of 2019. Part of their curriculum requires the students to get hands-on experience of an activity, and after one of their instructors scoped out the garden, they decided it would be a good space for them. The students are named Ryan and Daniela, and I had the privilege of seeing them for weeks come to the garden and bloom along with it.

At first, the two were shy and stuck around their instructor; they were assigned tasks like everyone else and would work as a group, but every week Ryan and Daniela got more comfortable with the volunteers. Their transformation was remarkable; soon enough they were giving us hugs when they got there, sat with us when it was time to eat our meal, and formed a bond with many of us. Ryan could pull down the pomegranates from the top of the tree because he was so tall, and you could see his face brighten with accomplishment when he did something no one else could at that time. Daniela’s journey was moving to watch. She would be so excited to see all of us and would greet us multiple times throughout our time in the garden, trying her best to make conversation, and smiling the whole time.

On the last day that we all were able to come together before the social distancing guidelines were put into place, we celebrated Daniela’s birthday. All the volunteers signed her a card and wrote a short message, and Roman and Adriana gifted her a cake. We all sat together after coming in from the garden, and as we sang happy birthday to her, she smiled and cried quietly. She went around and gave everyone a hug, two or three times over. You could see the gratitude in her expression. When she finally sat down to enjoy her cake, she would put her head
down and cry some more, clearly overwhelmed with happiness and feelings of inclusion, support, and companionship. Later, Ryan’s mother contacted Roman and Adriana to mention her gratitude for his time at the garden because his morale had gone up considerably and she attributed the change to the garden. Even though Ryan’s outward expression of transformation was not as drastic, he reaped benefits and they both were positively affected during the time they were able to go. So much so that their school has reached out to workforce solutions so that they can take advantage of a program they have that will do job placements and then pay them for working with Planty for the People. Adriana expressed that they are excited to work with them as soon as they can to help them gain more life skills and hopefully provide that same social support that they benefited from so much.

**Plant-based Benefits: Health, Support, and Access**

During my interaction with Roman and as part of our interviews, Roman expressed how monumental the plant-based lifestyle is to the success of the programs at One Grub Community and Planty for the People. When Roman talked about why he chose a fully plant-based menu for OGC, he says “I had an intention to bring the best food that I could possibly give to somebody, at a price that they could afford, and if not, a way to do it so that they can have it. And if it were going to be the only meal that they could have in a day, that it had to be the fullest of yummy nutrition. You need fiber, you need protein, you need good carbs, and whole grains. Honestly, it all comes out of plant-based food.” This intention along with the intention to provide food access for those who eat plant-based considering the lack of plant-based options in El Paso when they first started gave way to the delicious options that are available now. Roman noted he chooses to eat plant-based because of how it has made him feel, along with helping him gain a more compassionate mindset, a heightened respect for the Earth that has always been inside him,
as well as social responsibility after learning about the practices behind animal-based foods.

“I’ve learned too much to look the other way. You know what you know and you either choose to accept it, or you don’t… I don’t have a problem with people eating meat. But I do know what goes into that factory farming. I do know the intensity of the flat-out cruelty, the irresponsibility.”

Planty for the People provides a place for vegans to commune, physical health to be fostered, and the decolonization of our diets to be lived. When I first began to volunteer there, I remember saying to my partner that I was elated to meet other real-life vegans because aside from our family, I had never met anyone who lived this lifestyle. It is absolutely refreshing to talk to others who eat similarly to you about societal norms and how we break them, family struggles when you eat different diets or stray from your culture, and exchange tips, ideas, and even recipes. This kind of social support is much needed considering the higher-than-average bias that those who undertake a vegan lifestyle face because it is known that without social support, vegans can “relapse” back to eating animal products because the social pressure is too much to handle (Earle and Hodson 2018). Additionally, the fact that only vegan foods are provided by One Grub Community foster an air of health that all recognize and can feel good about; after eating, I would often hear volunteers talk about how good they felt after eating, rather than weighed down or tired; One volunteer stated: “I do feel very healthy there, which is great.” These statements are not just based on feelings alone.

Studies have shown that plant-based diets have prevented and even reversed illnesses such as heart disease (Ornish, Brown, Billings, Armstrong, Ports 1990) and diabetes (Bartolotto 2013). Huang et al. (2012) also found that vegetarians “have a significantly lower ischemic heart disease mortality (29%) and overall cancer incidence (18%) than nonvegetarians”. Some
volunteers have heard testimonies of these health effects in our time together, from personal stories of volunteers telling us the news of them being able to get off their diabetes medication and even Roman’s testimonies of how he lost a significant amount of weight. For these reasons, many volunteers value the space but feel that more formal conversations or classes should be incorporated as a part of the organization’s education and community building efforts; “I don’t think there’s enough discussion about veganism and either how to start evolving into eating vegan or how to apply it to other parts of your life. It should be a daily topic,” they said.

**What’s Next for Planty for the People**

Another shift that happened during the pandemic was that Planty for the People became a national seed hub after they were selected by another national non-profit organization, Cooperative Gardens. They are the first and only seed hub in this region, and they were selected as such due to the high number of people of color, indigenous population that signifies an underserved population. This means that they get sent all kinds of seeds including heirloom seeds every month so that Planty for the People can then distribute them to the public. “It gives people an idea of like, what they can grow here successfully,” Adrianna tells me. “We plan to only make available what's in what's successful by season. And then we collect our own seeds. So that's a whole other education process too. And, you know, there are cultures that take that very seriously, like seed collecting is -- it's a big deal.”

At this point, Adrianna says it's just a matter of us getting the program organized enough and then communicating it, and she is hoping to have it launched this year. Seeds have already been distributed to some volunteers, and Adriana tries to talk with each person about what kind of vegetables they like, and what they are able to grow in terms of space available. Because the project is very personalized and takes a lot of organization of seeds, it has been difficult to
launch and offer to the public while dealing with all the other aspects of the organization as well as a decreased volume of volunteers to assist in the process. This is extremely valuable to the community because seeds are sometimes expensive and hard to find for certain kinds of vegetables, and Planty for the People is offering potentially free or pay-what-you-can seeds to the community. Adriana plans to continue to organize the seeds and find an efficient system for distributing them, and when pandemic restrictions begin to be lifted and more volunteers can participate, more people will be able to receive this great program.

In October of 2020, El Paso Giving Day took place and this time there was no campaign kickoff event that One Grub Community could host. To replace it, Adriana, Paola, and I decided to focus on an Instagram campaign to communicate our need for funds to be raised. El Paso Giving Day is an annual 24-hour event that is held yearly to promote local charities of all kinds. They offer bonuses to the organizations for donating, like a donation matching program sponsored by Walmart, power hours throughout the day, where they offer monetary prizes for the organization that raises the most money in the designated hour, and social media contests like their ‘philanthropic photo prizes.’ Adriana and Roman outlined the existing and new projects that they wanted to highlight that the funds raised would be put towards, which were three major projects: a community pantry, garden enhancement (in-house fertilizing system, and a compost brewing system), and community garden essentials (shared hand tools, gloves, seeds, soil amendments, and garden equipment). The community pantry will provide a new option that would provide food security for the food desert and will be a free-standing box near the bus stop at One Grub Community. Eventually, Roman and Adriana plan to plant more fruit trees around the bus stop to provide shade and falling fruit for anyone waiting for the bus stop. A commercial dehydrator will also be purchased with donations from El Paso Giving Day to fill the pantry with
dry foods. Planty for the People is often incorporating new ways of bringing food security to the community while strengthening their current programs, and this helps to reach more people in different situations. The details of their plans, programs, as well as ways people could help were detailed in posts that were shared starting two weeks before El Paso giving day; examples of posts are pictured below.

![Figure 10: Social media campaign for EP Giving Day Instagram posts](image-url)
CHAPTER 6: CONTRIBUTIONS, CHALLENGES, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Contributions of this Research

I have provided an extensive list of benefits that One Grub Community and Planty for the People provide to their community, volunteers, and customers in qualitative and quantitative ways. Though in comparison to the larger food system that is established in our country their reach is relatively miniscule, their positive contributions to people’s lives should not be reduced. The list of benefits of volunteering with Planty for the People includes relaxation, human connection, better morale, community outreach, uplifted mood, stress relief, fulfillment, bonding with family or friends, consuming more fruits and veggies, getting a pay-it-forward meal, free seeds, free dried goods, being able to pay what you can for produce, uses and recipe ideas of unpopular produce, and knowledge of what vegetables grow well in the Southwest region, different types of composting, seeding, planting, transplanting, propagating, and so much more. All the long-term effects of these benefits can contribute to healing diseases, helping someone reach food security, and increasing overall health and wellbeing. One Grub Community provides a dimension of convenience and drawing people with friendly service and hospitality and with delicious, culturally appropriate, and plant-based foods and keeping them with their social mission; “the food just happens to be good and that brings people in, you know?” Roman says. “But once they’re in with us, it’s about so much more than that.” Their events provide education on specific topics that people may be interested in, like container gardening for those who do not backyards to garden in, processes of healthy cooking, and taking care of your physical and mental health with free yoga.

The reason this range of benefits is so wide is because of One Grub Community and Planty for the People’s diversified stream approach. This strength stems from the fact that
Roman and Adriana have not put all their eggs in one basket, but instead have taken on different projects, both for-profit, and non-profit projects that help to balance each other financially and provide a wider range of programs than if they just chose one. This Urban Political Ecological approach brings about a short-term solution for the immediate symptoms of food insecurity (affordable to free produce, meals, seeds, dried goods) as well as providing long term approaches to this problem (education on growing foods, gardening, cooking, wellness-related classes).

The benefits I have listed are examples of how communities can manage food insecurity and increase healthy food access, and explain why volunteerism, social support, and community building through urban gardening, within marginalized communities are valuable. These findings have the potential to encourage policy makers and those with financial capital to allow pathways (government-funded programs, corporate grants to nonprofits, etc.) that will support these activities. Lives can be changed, whether they are lives of someone who is looking to heal themselves and reclaim their food, or someone who just needs a short-term solution to be able to feed themselves and their family. Through this research, social change is being made that brings society a step closer, albeit a small one, to receiving equity, which is one of the ultimate objectives of sociology as a study. My literature review has proven that we understand food insecurity as one of the symptoms of an inequitable system that does not favor low-income or people of color, of which El Paso majorly has. My research supports action on this understanding and provides evidence that such initiatives work.

This research also supports community-based participatory research (CBPR) as a methodology and Urban Political Ecology (UPE) as a theoretical practicum for food justice as described above. Community engaged research is extremely important in academia so that our findings directly benefit the community while provided further evidence of the benefits of such
programs in underserved border communities. Researchers should have a greater responsibility to be a part of a solution if they can, and CBPR has provided me the opportunity to do so. I have demonstrated that this kind of research provides both applied and academic value.

One of the gaps in the literature identified in Chapter 3 was the use of a more ecological approach to food access research by including more of the “dynamic interaction between other food venues, including restaurants, corner stores, gas stations, etc.” (Walker et al., 2010, p. 882). The documentation of this multidimensional pay-it-forward café as a food venue that supports food access in a food desert along the U.S.-Mexico border provides more explanation on these venues’ roles in food deserts; they show how these kinds of venues can become hubs of community empowerment, connection, care, healing, and commensality. Further, this research exemplifies how forming a community of care with various strategies that address both the immediate symptoms of food insecurity, but also offers long term solutions through free educational programs and discounted, soon to be WIC-certified foods. Planty for the People and One Grub Community also show how adopting a model of social entrepreneurship that includes both non-profit and for-profit businesses can help workers earn a living wage and make enough profit to keep the business flourishing, while also incorporating a strong social justice mission that helps many people who need it and provides a space to help and contribute to the community, for those who are able to do so.

Finally, though One Grub Community and Planty for the People may not be able to completely eradicate the complex issue of food insecurity in the whole town of El Paso, their involvement with other community organizations, leaders, and shelters, reminds us that working with others is key to making a wide-spread impact. Roman and Adriana’s continual willingness to partner with other organizations aided in spreading awareness of both organizations or
business and helped to diversify the products they sell at OGC. Additionally, both the local food promotion program and the partnerships with organization helps OGC and Planty for the People provide a wider range of available events and foods to a diversified customer base that includes both food-insecure, low-income people, and those who are cannot access foods because of dietary needs but may have higher incomes and therefore may be willing to financially support in ways they can.

It is in the best interest of any marginalized community, including the border city of El Paso, Texas, to continue to research pay-it-forward, community-based organizations and urban gardens and to look further into solutions for social justice issues, like food justice. More research on this food desert, or in food deserts that are in colonias, on the margins of El Paso, is still needed. Also, more research of pay-it-forward cafes, or even organizations/small businesses with a focus on community engagement, education, and empowerment through urban gardening would be helpful in continuing to understand how we can manage such dire problems as food access, obesity, poor mental health, apathy, and disconnectedness in a highly technological society, and most relevantly, food insecurity.

**Lessons learned, Challenges, and Recommendations:**

**The Learning is in the Little Things**

As social entrepreneurs, Roman and Adriana have made it clear that the way their strategy to run both businesses is by listening and letting things happen. It is not just their multidimensional business scheme that brings together for-profit and non-profit business, but also this ability to adapt what has come to them. They have had many obstacles come their way and they have intentionally gone with the flow of things and listened to their customers, volunteers, stakeholders, and their own needs, to bring about a solution with the least amount of
resistance. “There's like two schools of thought processes: there are people that just make things happen, right. And then there are people that let things happen,” Adriana explains. “I don't think one is better than the other. But, for us, we really wanted to come to the table with a blank canvas. We really wanted the community to kind of form this into what it needed to be for the community.” This has ended up working in their favor as they will naturally flow with what is most important instead of trying to force programs or circumstances to happen.

Every time they have tried to force something to happen, they have not been fruitful or have wasted valuable time. For example, Roman and Adriana told me that the plans to do online cooking and gardening classes at the beginning of lockdown was something that they really tried to force but ended up not accomplishing. They did do videos on at home cooking demos through Instagram that ended up taking exceedingly long and not reaching many people, and the gardening and cooking classes were going to turn out being more expensive for people than expected. Roman says, “we fought tooth and nail for months trying to put this class together. We figured, ‘We're gonna figure out a class. We're gonna make it online. Maybe we'll pre-record it. Maybe we'll live stream. Maybe we'll do’ -- and finally, it's like, ‘Haven't you learned your lesson yet? Like, no, you listen to that flow!’” Instead, that ‘flow’ found new outlets that would help the public, like becoming a seed hub and providing free seeds of all kinds and starting to build the community dry-goods pantry that will stand alone on the property and allow people to pick up food at their own discretion.

Another lesson we can learn from our community partners is, as Roman said “find the blessing in the small.” As mentioned, if you look at it on a grand scheme, this project can seem quite unimportant. But if you find the blessing in the small, and you focus on the lady from down the street who was able to get a week’s worth of produce and fruit for her family for the
week, you gain a new sense of appreciation for the changes that can be made. As people, Adriana and Roman also offer lessons to us, from following our childhood passions to working as a team by playing on strengths. This is not to say that this is easy in any way or without challenges.

Besides the previously mentioned difficulty and time it takes to upkeep the garden, and the challenges brought about due to the pandemic, I will address 5 challenges that have come up throughout my research, including a lack of promotion at the brick-and-mortar locale, not enough discussion on the benefits of a plant-based diet/veganism, ambiguity about the pay-it-forward system, distinct types of volunteers, and a hesitation to accept free meals.

The first of these challenges was a theme that came up a few times in the guest interviews and one that is observed driving around their locale; various guests mentioned that there was not enough signage or local advertising in the local neighborhood. Their location relates to a church and takes up the whole block, and the community garden is a “street slower” as Roman says. Though it does call a lot of attention, that street does not have any signage and there is confusion about what the garden is for, if its open to the public, and people may be unaware that a restaurant is inside the locale. While volunteering, I have also seen many people walk by and marvel at the watermelon, the squash, and the sunflowers, and some have started conversations with us about this. This is something that Roman and Adriana are aware of and were working towards before the pandemic, but they have prioritized other pressing issues for the time being since the dining room has not been open since the spring. Once they can acquire more signage including more large banners, radio commercials, fliers, pop-ups around town, etc. they will be able to reach more people who are walking, or driving be.
I mentioned in chapter 5 that one of the volunteers wished that there were more of a focus on plant-based eating and a vegan lifestyle, including tips on transitioning, nutrition, and more. Many of the volunteers and customers expressed that the vegan food options were a part of what drew them to One Grub in the first place, and why they keep coming back. There was a lot of discussion about veganism when we would volunteer at garden days, and one volunteer even lowered her blood pressure and was able to get off her diabetes medication while we were actively volunteering. It was refreshing to meet with other people who are either open and nonjudgmental about a vegan lifestyle or partake in it allowing us to relate to each other in these ways. Additionally, Roman has expressed the value of knowing where your food comes from and the problems with the meat industry and globalized food system. However, there is no formal or structured program that has addressed this. Workshops and/or simply a page on their website that summarizes some of this information, or even links to resources might help this during the pandemic. This page can be shared on Facebook and Instagram along with some of the gardening tips that have already been compiled.

The third challenge Planty for the People faces is ambiguity from the public about the pay-it-forward program as well as the other programs that exist. Half of the customers I spoke with expressed that they have heard of the pay-it-forward program, but they were confused about the details of how it worked. When they were still in their food truck and selling at the farmer’s market, the pay-it-forward program was in its beginning stages and was a tip jar that would go towards large dinners that were brought to local shelters. The program has now evolved to include volunteerism in return for a free meal of up to $12, but the pandemic has added more ambiguity about what is accepted. A general explanation is available on the OGC website, but more details about what can be done during the pandemic, how the pay-it-forward coins fit in,
and the other ways the pay-it-forward program also works (such as donating large meals) could also be added. This should also be on the Planty for the People website, where it may be beneficial to also add other initiatives, like the pay-what-you-can for produce system, the seed hub initiative (once its ready to be fully launched), partnerships with other organization, etc. Fliers with this information could also be printed and offered to people at the counter or dropped in people’s to-go bags during the pandemic.

Another theme of the volunteer program is that there are a few types of volunteers in the garden, though they are not mutually exclusive. There are volunteers who are there to learn about gardening, some who go to support the organization’s mission, some go because they want the pay-it-forward meal because they are food insecure, some go to teach their children, and some go for social interaction and/or relaxation. Roman also mentioned how there are social groups that frequent the garden, like the college crowd, some from high school, some who are disabled and come from a nearby school, etc. Many volunteers belong to more than one category, like when people both want to learn how to garden and because they are struggling financially. This makes the wheels of the program spin smoothly because interest is expressed for all major facets. However, when volunteers belong to just one of the categories, some friction can arise; for example, when someone is food insecure volunteers but does not have an explicit desire to learn how to garden. To help ease this disconnect, an online module that includes a lot of the information that Adriana presents in the new volunteer orientations could be produced to explain them, as well as a quick survey to learn about why the volunteer came there. Then, diverse ways of volunteering could be offered for those who many do not have interest or ability to garden such as social media promotion on the volunteer’s social media, helping with
the seed program, creating and/or passing out fliers, even writing or putting together research and resources. This could also help with the lack of staffing that Planty for the People could use.

The final challenge that came up in my conversation with Roman and Adriana was the resistance and hesitation to accepting a free meal or a meal in return to volunteering. Though gifts of food are more freely given in our society by family, it is still very foreign to most to accept free food from an establishment. Our conversations have discussed this tension, where many people see the value in giving and do so, but those who need to take part in “taking” or getting a free meal after volunteering, especially when it is not after an event like garden days where it was predetermined that everyone would get their free meal, really hesitate in doing so. This could be due to the stigma that is put onto people who are low income, reminiscent of how people are often treated when they are on food stamps. There is also a lack of subtleness, especially during this pandemic when orders are taken over the phone, so it adds a dimension of awkwardness or fear of judgment from these socially engrained stigmas.

Roman and Adriana are aware and try their best to make it a seamless process, but this has been difficult during the pandemic. They have plans to install the free-standing outdoor community pantry that will be near the bus stop, which allows someone in need to pick up their food without having to ask anyone. Other ways to address this issue is to implement an online ordering system that allows people to request a meal before speaking with anyone, so they can at least set up the process before calling, and once they call, the employee who takes their order can look up their request. A ‘value menu’ could also be implemented as a part of the pay-it-forward program. This could have a couple of simple and affordable meals that are culturally familiar, like a bean burrito, or a small plate with beans, rice, and stir-fried veggies.
Future Research and Communicating to the Public

My research has a few limitations that I will acknowledge here with the hopes of future research addressing these limitations. A limitation that was out of my control was the result of social distancing guidelines that prevented me from continuing the social nature of community engaged research. The cancellation of garden days really imposed a level of difficulty because I stopped seeing almost all volunteers who were ‘regulars’ before the pandemic. The pandemic has also been an extremely overwhelming, stressful, and mentally draining time in our lives, and I think many of the previous regulars were consumed in this and were not as interested in talking about what we did before the pandemic hit, so I was unable to reach as many volunteers as I originally wanted. In hindsight, I would have done focus groups rather than individual interviews to help people bounce of each other's memories, thoughts, and experiences. I would also ask more open-ended questions about the benefits to tap into the idea of personal fulfillment after volunteering, mood changes, health outcomes, etc.

My research questions allowed me to address this organization from a wide variety of angles, but this also detracted me from focusing in on certain topics that I believe could be explained in more detail. Future research could focus on topics such as health benefits of the plant-based diet and case studies of people who have adopted the diet because of One Grub Community’s influence, as well as research concerning the reach of the vegan movement in border towns as well.

To come full circle on the initial approach and purpose of my research with was to conduct research in partnership with the community, I plan to do a few things to communicate my research back to the public as well as to offer my continual help in developing programing for the organization. I want to incorporate fact sheets and executive summaries that help to (1)
present my findings on the benefits of volunteering for personal gain and for the organization so that prospective volunteers can see what they can gain from volunteering, (2) provide an executive summary of available of what volunteers and/or the public can offer to the public, so that Roman and Adriana can provide that as well, (3) discuss benefits of veganism and plant-based diet, testimonies from people in our community, a list of resources and studies and (4) provide condensed takeaways from food insecurity and food sovereignty literature especially in El Paso and other marginalized communities. All of these can also be published on the website as well if Roman and Adriana want to do so.

Overall, the community appreciates what Planty for the People and One Grub Community have provided for the community and how Roman and Adriana work together. “To see how they have managed to work as a team outside the home to create not only a business but also a community nonprofit shows how well their principles and values are strongly rooted.” a volunteer said. “The compassion is poured out for others in sharing and it is experienced when you are at the garden days and dine at One Grub. The compassion for growth, learning, unifying, and serving is in everything they do!”

When I asked Roman and Adriana what they wanted the community to take from what they do, it was hard for them to put into words. It was clear there is a lot that comes to mind. Primarily, they just want people to know that there really is a place that they can come to get food when they need it. “There really is a place where you can get food if you need it. And our local hands really work hard of growing it for you. And you can pay what you need. It’s very basic,” Roman says. He also expressed how he wants people to consider how food is to be treated, and that is with respect. “Food means culture, and food means sustenance, of course. But to me, food also means responsibility,” Roman explains. “It’s been a lot of years where I
didn’t realize that I had this responsibility doing what I was doing, and I was either contributing to a machine, or I was contributing to something positive. Cooks are people of influence… I didn’t know. So, food is now a responsibility that I happily take on. It should mean the same thing to all of us because collectively if we took on that responsibility, there would be a drastic change.” Through the initiatives at One Grub and Planty for the People, it seems this change is a lot closer and attainable than it was before.
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Retrieved from https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/179316#prevention
APPENDIX 1 - SURVEY GUIDE

Online Survey for OGC Customers/PFTP supporters

Thank you so much for taking the time to participate in this survey. The information you choose to provide will be kept confidential and used for the purpose of a larger study on One Grub Community/Planty for the People’s contributions to the community, specifically regarding food access, community support, and education

1. How long have you been a One Grub customer?
   0-3 months 3-6 months 6-12 months 1-2 years 2+ years
2. How did you hear about One Grub Community? ________________ (open-ended)
3. How satisfied are you with the food at One Grub Community?
   Very dissatisfied Dissatisfied Neutral Satisfied Very Satisfied
4. How satisfied are you with the service at One Grub Community?
   Very dissatisfied Dissatisfied Neutral Satisfied Very Satisfied
5. Do you know about OGC’s associated non-profit organization, Planty for the People?
   yes/no
6. Were you aware of the on-site garden?
   Yes/No
7. Were you aware of the educational, gardening, and community events that take place here?
   yes/no
8. Were you aware of the volunteer opportunity every Wednesday (Garden Wednesdays) that provides gardening education and an opportunity to enjoy a Pay-It-Forward meal?
   yes/no
9. Have you ever volunteered for Planty for the People at Garden Days or any other event, or for another project?
   yes/no
*if yes, would you like to expand? __________(open-ended)
10. Does the fact that they have a plant-based menu play into why you support them as a customer?
    yes/no/somewhat
11. Are you currently struggling with food insecurity?
Yes/No*

*if they answer yes, they will be given a Pay-It-Forward meal (which means up to $12 is free for them/technically sponsored by any previous donations to Planty for the People including the purchase of a “Pay-It-Forward (PIF) coin”), and provided information on how else Planty for the People can help them.

12. If yes, have you benefited from any of One Grub/Planty for the People’s available programs?

yes/no

13. If yes, which ones? __________

Please contact Marina Villegas (mvillegas7@miners.utep.edu) for more information on this survey, One Grub Community and their mission, or would like to expand on your thoughts about food access in El Paso.

Online Survey for Volunteers

Thank you so much for taking the time to participate in this survey. The information you choose to provide will be kept confidential and used for the purpose of a larger study on One Grub Community (OGC)/Planty for the People’s (PFTP) contributions to the community, specifically regarding food access, community support, and education.

1. How long have you been a volunteer with OGC/Planty for the People?

0-3 months 3-6 months 6-9 months 9-12 months 12+months

2. What events have you participated in?

________________ (open-ended)

3. What is your favorite part about volunteering?

________________ (open-ended)

The rest of the questions will each have the following scale to answer them:

Strongly Disagree-Disagree-Slightly Disagree-Neutral-Slightly Agree-Agree-Strongly Agree

4. The events that I have partaken in have allowed me to learn more about gardening and growing my own food.

5. The friends and connections I’ve made have been genuine and special to me.

6. The activities performed in the garden have been therapeutic for me.

7. I sought out Planty for the People/OGC because I was interested in gardening.

8. I sought out Planty for the People/OGC because I was in need of food and heard about their pay-it-forward program.
9. I sought out Planty for the People/OGC because I wanted to contribute to their mission of food access.
10. I sought out Planty for the People/OGC to bond and learn with my family/children.
11. I have adopted better eating habits as a result of my volunteerism with OGC/PFTP.
12. I have seen an instance where someone who needed food was fed because of OGC/PFTP.
13. I have been inspired to start gardening at home after beginning to volunteer here.
14. I was gardening even before volunteering here and wanted to learn more.
15. The fact that they have a plant-based menu plays into why I support One Grub Community.
16. I was interested in gardening before volunteering, but never had any experience successfully doing it, so I wanted to learn more.
17. Since the start of my volunteerism here at OGC/PFTP, I have been gardening at home.

Please contact Marina Villegas (mvillegas7@miners.utep.edu) for more information on this survey, One Grub Community and their mission, or would like to expand on your thoughts about food access in El Paso.
APPENDIX 2 - INTERVIEW GUIDES

Interview with Roman and Adriana Wilcox – Fall 2019

1. Can you talk about how you and Roman got started with One Grub Community? When did you get started, what were your motivations?
   a. I know you have a lot of information on food access in El Paso, can you tell me how issues of food access shaped the creation of Planty for the People?
2. What programs are currently taking place here (the cafe and the non-profit)?
3. How did you and Estella (volunteer horticulturist) come together to get Garden Days started?
4. Did any other notable relationships come out of One Grub/Plant for the People?
5. Are you vegan? If you are, for how long have you been?
   b. Do you feel like there is a stigma around being vegan?
   c. Did you ever mean for the organization to be a place of social support for vegan/plant-based people, or was it an effect?
6. How important was it to you and Roman that the cafe was fully plant-based and why?
7. What is the most fulfilling part of what you do?
8. What are your plans for the community?

Post COVID-19 Interview - To be done in April 2020

1. Tell me about the approach you took when responding to COVID 19 and how it worked out.
2. Tell me the stories of the people you serve (before or after the pandemic). Who do you serve? Is there anyone that you check in on that you have connected with through all your work in the community?
3. What motivates you in your mission to provide food access?
4. What does the future look like for both One Grub and Planty for the People?

Horticulturist (Estela) Semi-Structured Interview

1. Tell me about yourself and how you became a horticulturist.
2. Tell me about why you started working with OGC/PFTP? How did you meet Roman and Adriana?
3. What does the whole project of the community garden mean to you personally?
4. How has it affected you and your everyday life?
5. What are your aspirations for One Grub/PFTP?
6. Have you ever personally dealt with food insecurity or known someone who struggles? Do you think it’s a relevant issue?
7. Which vegetable plant(s) are staples for a garden in this climate?
8. Do you have any other suggestions for anyone in this area looking to connect with their power to grow their own food?

Volunteer Interview
1. Tell me a little bit about why you volunteer with Planty for the People.
2. How long have you been volunteering at One Grub Community? Around how many times total?
3. Can you tell me about some of the benefits of your experiences volunteering here?
4. Tell me about what you’ve learned or experienced at One Grub and what you will take with you from your experiences here.
5. What do you think about OGC/PFTP’s mission to provide access?
6. If you’re willing to share, have you or anyone you know ever been affected by food insecurity?
7. Are you vegan? If so, can you tell me a little bit about why, and how that fits into why you’re here (if at all)?
8. What did you think about their response to COVID-19? Did you participate in any volunteer activities during COVID-19?
9. Do you have any ideas or strategies that Planty for the People can take right now to help those who are most food insecure (beside the produce box)?

Customer Interview

1. How did you initially find out about OGC?
2. What do you like most about it? What might you change?
3. How does OGC’s menu play into your choice to support them?
4. Have you ever interacted with the non-profit side of OGC, PFTP (participated in garden days, bought a PIF coin)? If yes, can you tell me about it?
5. Do you have any suggestions or strategies for One Grub that you think might help them reach more people who are food insecure?
This newsletter was the first that I developed as a prototype to help promote the new events (educational gardening workshops, yoga classes, etc.) as a result of increased networking and connections with other organizations. The year 2020 was starting as a very community-involved year, as 2019 left off, but with a bigger volunteer team that was meeting weekly and planning, strategizing, and marketing. We were not able to produce the numbers in the left-hand sidebar with the time we had, so we shared only the calendars and began to promote events individually as well via Instagram and Facebook, as seen below.

Figures 2 and 3: Social media posts advertising events that were planned before the lockdown.
This pdf was made accessible by a QR code and included on every box that was given out to the community during the covid-19 shelter in place resolution passed in April of 2020 in El Paso, TX. It was made to help people identify the produce available and includes nutritional benefits as provided by healthline.org, and recipe ideas or other uses for each of them.
VITA

Marina Villegas is a Sociology graduate student and teaching assistant at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP). She obtained a Bachelor of Arts in Journalism with a concentration in Strategic Communication/Advertising at the University of North Texas. Marina has worked in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), property management, social media marketing, event planning, and as a tutor for undergraduate students at UTEP. She has participated in an interdisciplinary heat campaign research project, entrepreneurial workshops associated with food insecurity solutions, and an effort to document cooking efforts of the El Paso during COVID-19 in a Cookbook. The goal of her research is to explore solutions to food insecurity and spread awareness on plant-based diets and community gardening, while working closely with the community.

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