

**Seeds of Diversity
Youth in Food Systems Program**

Volunteer Impact Stories

**Prepared by:
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OVERVIEW

The Youth in Food Systems Program is a volunteer opportunity for youth ages 14 to 19 in Waterloo Region and beyond to learn about various sustainable food careers while building skills, confidence and connections. Participants volunteer on a variety of youth-led projects that have the dual aim of increasing knowledge of sustainable food careers while building skills and other outcomes.

Good Roots Consulting was hired by Seeds of Diversity to evaluate the Youth in Food Systems Program to learn what difference the program is making for participants and how program delivery can be strengthened. Below are impact stories developed from interviews completed with youth volunteers in the program. In the interviews, volunteers were asked about their experience and their aspirations for the future as it relates to engagement with and support for sustainable food systems.

In total, 5 youth volunteers completed interviews.

Gabrielle Asamoah

Gabrielle Asamoah volunteers as an interviewer for the Youth in Food Systems program's Food Leader Interview series. The interviews connect youth with people working in food systems careers to learn about education and employment paths, and then share those learnings through YouTube videos, podcasts and infographics.

Gabrielle really enjoys the process of conducting the interviews with people who have different roles across the food system and appreciates the open communication she has with program staff. "I think it was definitely something that made the process go smoother and gave me less concern about if I were to run into any incidents or mishap with the interviews, I could definitely find someone easily to ask for help," she shared.

As a result of taking part in the Youth in Food Systems program, Gabrielle feels she has gained valuable conversation skills, such as how to maintain flow, be attentive, and keep an open mind. "I think that's thanks to the opportunity of interviewing where you have to really pay attention to what your interviewee is saying," she explained. "I think those are practical skills and are also transferable skills which you can use in the workplace."

Gabrielle also shared that conducting the interviews has helped further her understanding about food systems: "In the education I've been given, you don't actually learn too much about food systems in the depth that I've had the opportunity to experience in interviews. I'm really grateful for that as well because now I can think more complexly about subjects of food systems and also career paths in food systems as well."

One career path that Gabrielle recently learned about through an interview is that of a program coordinator at a non-profit. "With my interview with them, it was very captivating to see what they could do in the food systems with program coordinating and I think it really is inspiring to put together a program that can further someone's insight on a very specific industry," she shared.

Moving forward, Gabrielle feels she will be more open to taking opportunities that are presented to her as a result of her participation in the Youth in Food Systems program. "This was an opportunity that was given to me and if I hadn't taken that I wouldn't have accumulated this experience or this mindset, or even the skills I have today."

John Lehman

John Lehman's favourite part of volunteering with the Youth in Food Systems program is helping on market days for the Youth Food Market. The Market is organized by high school students who plant food gardens, source local produce, conduct market research, and promote and staff an affordable market stall on pop-up market days.

John shared that he has gained valuable first-hand experience working at the Market, as well as garnered skills in customer service and finance. "The market days gave me some experience with selling stuff and how markets work in the real world, being able to see interactions with people from a seller's standpoint," he explained.

Volunteering on market days and assisting with garden maintenance has sparked John's interest in learning more about careers that combine plants and business. "I never really had an interest in plants before, but after the program, I think that I can find new ways to be interested in plants and see if there's some sort of career that might be related to plants," he shared. "Also, I learned about business. I think it's made me more interested in that and I could combine that with the new plant knowledge."

As a result of taking part in the program, John feels that he is now more open to pursuing new opportunities in the future. "One of the most important things I learned would be to always be open to new opportunities, if it's volunteering, a job, a new pathway, or a career choice," he shared. "I'm still young enough that I have time to choose and I should probably dip my toes in a bunch of different places and see what it's like."

John is also more interested in taking part in initiatives to help his community: "After seeing people at the market days, seeing the smile after they buy stuff, it just really makes me want to help out in the community more."

John said that he would recommend this program to other youth looking to gain practical knowledge: "I learned a lot of real-world skills... and seeing how stuff gets applied in real life. I think it gives me an upper hand compared to other people."

Linda Qi

As a volunteer with the Youth in Food Systems program, Linda Qi assists with designing, editing and publishing food systems-related posts for The Youth Blog. When asked to reflect on her favourite part of the program, Linda shared that she really enjoys learning new things and helping spread that knowledge to others. “When you're editing and publishing, you have to read the blog posts and you learn a lot of the information,” she shared. “You also get to see your own work pay off and you get to see it posted on the website, and then you get to see people look at it and it's really fun.”

Linda also values that she can apply the knowledge she has gained through volunteering in other aspects of her life: “For example, when I was working on a design for social media, I had to do some research about nutrients and you get to learn about that. And then you also get to apply those skills in real life because then you're suddenly like, ‘Oh I know what that is.’ It feels really cool because you're doing something really fun, and then you also get to translate it into your life.”

Through her work on the blog, Linda feels she has gained organizational and professional skills. “You get to become more organized. You get to learn how to schedule things. You get to plan out. You feel responsible for your blog,” she explained. “You get to have some real-life experience on how things might work in the future when you're responsible for your own work.”

Linda also appreciates that the Youth in Food Systems program provides youth with the opportunity to explore their own interests and try new things. “Maybe you don't like writing but then you could do designing. Maybe you don't really like designing, then you can do social media. If you don't like social media, you can do interviewing. There are so many different volunteer opportunities!”

Linda shared that she’s still exploring what career might best suit her in the future, but her time in the program has helped shed light on what is out there. “The program definitely gives you a chance to look at a wide range of potential jobs or careers,” she explained. “There are so many careers in the food system industry that aren't really well known because the systems are so big and there are so many jobs that are needed to sustain it. The program gives you a chance to experience and learn about lots of them.”

Grace Luan

In the Youth in Food Systems program, Grace Luan volunteers as a graphic designer for the program's social media. Grace shared that her favourite part of her role is being able to spread information about the environment to other youth: "I really liked how it encouraged more youth to start thinking about the environment and how important it is to the world around us."

Grace also enjoys collaborating with other volunteers and program staff to motivate and inspire one another. "The monthly meetings were a very encouraging and motivating space where we just bounced ideas off each other. And I found that really helps me generate new ideas for posts as well as ideas in general that I could use in my life," she explained.

Grace shared that her experience in the program has helped to cultivate her communication, creative, and graphic design skills. "I've really learned the importance of communicating effectively within a group and how that helps boost group morale as well as effective and productive work. I will definitely be implementing this skill in any future jobs I may have," she explained. "And another practical skill that I think I've practiced a lot and it's pretty new to me is graphic designing. I've gained a lot of creativity and innovation."

Grace also reflected on how she has become more environmentally active and aware because of participating in the program: "For example, I used to see a plastic bag and think 'Oh that goes in the garbage.' But now I have this instinct to check if it has a recycling logo on it and then I can put it in the recycling bin. And another change that happened was that I joined the Environmental Council of my school. I thought it was a great way to extend my interests for both the environment and for food systems."

Moving forward, Grace hopes to continue working toward creating positive social change. "I think I learned that any amount of impact that one makes to a positive cause helps and is important to the overall cause," she reflected. "I've also learned because of this, to put the most effort into everything I do, in hopes of more impact and a better world around me."

Kathleen Nguyen

Kathleen Nguyen volunteers as a content creator for the Youth in Food Systems program's social media accounts. In this role, Kathleen enjoys working collaboratively with other volunteers and program staff. "Talking to other volunteers and staff about food systems helped me brainstorm a lot of new ideas and explore a lot of things that I wouldn't have thought about by myself," she explained. "It also helped me to learn different skills, to be more open minded and learn from others around me."

Creating content for the program's social media has provided Kathleen with a healthy outlet to be creative. "I was able to relieve a lot of my stress by expressing my creativity through these posts. I was able to try out different things and experiment with each post, and I felt like it was a way for me to take my mind off of school or life and focus on one thing," she reflected.

Kathleen also discussed the value of the design skills she developed in the program in her education and future career. "I was able to use my design skills for school projects, designing slides for presentations or designing posters, for example. And I think that a lot of jobs right now are more focused on social media because of how times are changing, so I feel like advertisements would also use my skills in a different way."

While researching different topics for content creation, Kathleen also learned more about different environmental issues: "Even though I learned about climate change or how food systems are impacted at school, I feel like it was very surface level, but with my posts, I was able to learn so much more." Kathleen also feels that this knowledge has had a positive impact on her behaviour: "I feel like my lifestyle definitely changed. For example, I learned a lot about taking care of the environment and being mindful of the waste that we're producing while buying food."