FY 2012 – YMCA of Greater Grand Rapids

$86,159 to YMCA of Greater Grand Rapids, Grand Rapids, MI, to implement a strategic marketing plan to increase use of food assistance benefits such as SNAP and WIC at a farmers market and mobile market with the goal of enhancing low-income residents' buying power and local farmers' sales.

Final Report

Farmers Market Promotion Program
Final Performance Report
For the Period of October 1, 2012 – September 30, 2014

Date:	*19-Dec-14*
Recipient Name:	*YMCA of Greater Grand Rapids*
Project Title:	*YMCA Food Desert Project: Strategic Marketing to Low-Income Residents*
Grant Number:	*12-25-G-1579*
Project Location:	*Grand Rapids, Mchigan*
Year of Grant Award:	*2012*
Amount Awarded:	*$86,159*
Contact:	*Sara Vander Zanden, svanderzanden@grymca.org 616-855-9601*

Program Summary:

The goal of our project is to increase healthy food access in food deserts and low-income communities in Grand Rapids, Michigan through a strategic marketing plan that promote the use of food assistance benefits, including SNAP, WIC Project FRESH Senior Project FRESH/Market Fresh, and Double Up Food Bucks so that more of these federal funds are spent on produce grown by local farmers.

The goal of this project was to build economic opportunity for local farmers and to increase healthy food access in food deserts and low income communities in Grand Rapids, Michigan. We accomplished this through the development of a strategic marketing plan to promote the use of food assistance benefits so that more of these federal funds are spent on produce grown by local farmers. In addition to promoting the use of food assistance benefits at farmers markets, we helped build the capacity of local farmers by providing educational opportunities such as workshops focused on marketing, merchandising, communicating in niche or specialty markets, and how to market to resource limited customers and health conscious shoppers. By increasing the number of customers served through the Farmers Market and the Veggie Van, and substantially increasing sales, we have successfully increased healthy food access for vulnerable residents, and expanded economic opportunities for small local farmers through sales revenues that increased by over 500% from 2012 to 2014.

Goals and Objectives:

This project's goal was to increase economic opportunity for local farmers by increasing healthy food access in food deserts and low-income communities in Grand Rapids, Michigan through a strategic marketing plan that promoted the use of food assistance benefits, including SNAP, WIC Project FRESH, Senior Project FRESH/Market FRESH, and Double Up Food Bucks so that more federal funds were spent on produce grown by local farmers.

In 2010, Michigan State University College of Human Medicine and Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan sponsored a study of food stores in Grand Rapids' food desert and high poverty neighborhoods. Using NEMS analysis, researchers found that of the 37 stores identified, 11 were grocery stores, only four sold any produce and only one sold fresh produce. The YMCA's Farmers Market and Veggie Van Mobile Farmers Market were established to fill this shocking lack of access to fresh, local food.

Activities:

Our goal was accomplished through increased advertising efforts (including print, radio, billboards, and direct mail), promotional coupons and other marketing efforts.
The marketing and promotion of the Farmers Market took a variety of forms during the duration of the grant. These included:

- *Billboards strategically placed around the market*
- *Paid newspaper advertisements in local Latino and African American newspapers, and other small community newspapers*
- *Article placement in local newspapers*
- *Radio interviews*
- *Bus tail advertisements*
- *Direct Mail to SNAP recipients*
- *Flyers/Coupons distributed at the market & promotional events*
- *Neighborhood street signs and flyers placed in neighborhood businesses*
- *Social media (Facebook, Twitter) and email*
- *Branding-standardization (Farmer's Market and Veggie Van logos used on all marketing materials)*
- *Relationship marketing (word-of-mouth)*

We continuously worked to recruit new vendors and farmers for the Farmers Market and the Veggie Van and to strengthen relationships with existing vendors. We offered workshops and trainings aimed at helping farmers/vendors build capacity and assist them with the process of accepting WIC, SNAP and other food assistance benefits.

Each market day we created a fun and inviting market atmosphere with live music and youth-centered activities such as games, crafts and face painting. In addition, we hosted cooking demonstrations and sampling stations that featured a healthy recipe made with seasonal ingredients available at the farmers market. Feedback from vendors and customers was evaluated in order to make improvements to the market. This data was also used to evaluate the success of this project. During each market season, random customer surveys were conducted. This short survey (available in both English and Spanish) asked respondents 10 questions aimed at gathering feedback regarding the market, customer shopping habits, marketing strategies and demographic information. During the 2014 market season, we were able to survey close to 200 customers and in 2013 we surveyed 204 customers. This is nearly double the number of surveys collected in 2012. (A copy of the survey is included in the attachments).

Throughout the grant period, we also collected data to measure the impact of our marketing efforts. Data collected included customer counts, total sales, and total food assistance sales for both the Farmers Market and the Veggie Van. In addition, we tracked purchases from local farmers for produce sold to the Veggie Van.

Accomplishments:

Over the entire project, we accomplished the following:

1. Attracted more customers to the market and the Veggie Van.
In 2012, our farmers market and Veggie Van mobile farmers market served 14,549 customers. In 2013, we increased our customer count to 16,000 and in 2014, we served 17,175 customers.

2. Increased consumption of local agricultural products.
In 2012, total combined sales from our farmers market and Veggie Van totaled $16,603.69. In 2013, total sales increased to $84,122.23, a 406.6% increase over the prior year. In 2014, total sales increased to $91,581.70, an 8.8% increase over 2013 sales.

3. Increased the amount spent using food assistance benefits (SNAP, WIC, and Double Up Food Bucks).
Despite consistently increasing the sales between 2012 and 2014, sales made with food assistance benefits did not see the same level of growth. In 2012, food assistance sales totaled $19,763.53, but declined to $15,180.41 in 2013. This decline could be attributed to a delay in the Direct Mail Campaign to SNAP recipients. Y staff worked closely with Fair Food Network, an organization with extensive experience in implementing direct mail campaigns to SNAP eligible recipients in the Greater Grand Rapids community. Unfortunately, Fair Food Network did not send out a mailing to SNAP recipients until mid-August. In an attempt to coordinate our mailing with theirs, we were unable to send out our direct mail materials until the third week of August—almost three months after the start of the farmers market. This hurt our ability to market to SNAP eligible populations who lived close to the market. The mailing—which included logistic information about the market, Double Up Food Bucks opportunities and coupons—was sent to SNAP-eligible residents who lived within a half mile radius of the market. In 2014, we were able to implement the Direct Mail Campaign to SNAP-eligible residents in June, much earlier than in 2013. This resulted in a total of $17,970.47 is sales made with food assistance benefits.

4. Increased understanding of which marketing methods are most effective
Customer surveys are conducted each year, in part to gather information needed to evaluate the effectiveness of our marketing methods. Baseline results from 2012 showed the five most effective marketing methods included: yard signs/signs outside the Y, relationship marketing/word-of-mouth, posters and flyers. Paid advertisements in local ethnic print media (e.g. Latino and African American newspapers), advertisements in other local print media (e.g. Grand Rapids Press), and bus tail advertisements were shown to be ineffective and were eliminated from future campaigns.

Our 2013 marketing plan included the following:

Billboard: One billboard placed on the corner of Lake Michigan Drive & Summer ave from June through August.
Yard Signs: Six signs placed throughout the neighborhood surrounding the Y.

Banner: Banner displayed outside of the DDH Y Branch

Direct Mail Campaign: 2,167 $4 coupons mailed to residents in a 1/2 mile radius of the farmers market

Coupons: 500 $2 coupons distributed at the market and at promotional events

Social Media: An average of 2-3 times per week the Farmers Market was mentioned on various Y social media outlets

Paid Advertisement: Ad placed in the farmers market section of On The Town Magazine, a monthly arts and entertainment publication with circulation of 30,000/month

Posters/Flyers: 100 11 x 7 posters placed in nearby businesses; 1000 bookmark flyers distributed to local businesses and community events.

Newspaper Articles: Article in Sunday paper in June.

Our 2014 marketing plan included:

Billbaords: One billboard placed on the corner of Lake Michigan Drive & Summer ave from June through August. (Copy of billboard attached)

Yard Signs: 40 yard signs placed throughout the neighborhood surrounding the Y (copy of sign attached)

Banner: Banner displayed outside of the DDH Y Branch

Direct Mail Campaign: 2,616 direct mail postcards mailed to residents in a ½ mile radius of the farmers market (copy attached)

Coupons: 1000 printed and distributed to childcare parents, group exercise participants and at community events.

Social Media: An average of 2-3 times per week the Farmers Market was mentioned on various Y social media outlets; 14 recipes featuring fresh produce from the farmers market posted to Pinterest (https://www.facebook.com/pages/YMCA-Farmers-Market/145014825569789)

YMCA e-Blast newsletter: Monthly email blast sent to an average of 43,000 recipients

Newspaper Articles: Five articles in the Grand Rapids Press and the Rapidian between May and August.
Posters/Flyers: 100 11 x 7 posters placed in nearby businesses; 1000 bookmark flyers distributed to local businesses and at community events (Copy of poster attached)

Veggie Van Newsletter: Weekly newsletter featuring produce available at the farmers market and the Veggie Van, recipes and other nutritional information emailed to 300+ each week (Copy of newsletter attached)

An analysis of 2012 baseline results, combined with 2013 and 2014 survey results, show the five methods cited by survey respondents when asked how they found out about the farmers market consistently included:

- *Saw the market while walking through the neighborhood*
- *YMCA membership newsletter/email/other communication*
- *Yard signs/signs outside the Y*
- *Billboards*
- *Flyers or posters in nearby businesses*

5. Helped local farmers and vendors build capacity through workshops

To help local farmers and vendors build capacity, we provided training and workshops in both 2013 and 2014. On May 9, 2013, we offered a workshop that focused on strategies to help answer the question, "can I really make money at a market in a low-income neighborhood?" The workshop also covered areas such as marketing, merchandising, communicating in niche or specialty markets and how to market to both resource limited customers and health conscious shoppers. On May 1, 2014, a workshop was offered that focused on helping farmers maximize their limited resources, namely time and money. Experts provided tips on marketing, merchandising, customer service, and price setting for both direct-to-consumer and wholesale markets. Approximately 15 vendors took part in each of the workshops offered. (Copies of flyers attached).

Beneficiaries:

Describe and provide the actual numbers for both the direct and indirect beneficiaries of grant activities. As appropriate, include demographic composition of market vendors, customers and the surrounding market area (income level, ethnicity, age, etc.). Describe how specific groups benefitted from the grant, including any potential economic impact. Provide data supporting these conclusions. Ideally, this should include feedback from vendors and consumers, as well as any available quantitative data.

The YMCA Farmer's Market is located at 475 Lake Michigan Drive NW, Grand Rapids MI 49504. This location boarders three Food Desert Tracts: 26-081-001300, 26-081-001400 and 26-081-000900. The total population for this area is 9,470 individuals. The racial/ethnic demographics for these three Census Tracts are: 66% White, 15.1% Black, 11.9% Latino, 2.1% Asian, and 4% Two or More Races. High levels of poverty (27.3%) also exists, coupled with high rates of unemployment (20%). In addition, over one third (36.4%) of residents lack a high school diploma or GED.
The Y's Farmer's Market also serves four additional low-income neighborhoods collectively known as "Hope Zones". These neighborhoods have a combined total population of 37,161, and are some of the lowest income neighborhoods in the city. The ethnic breakdown for these neighborhoods includes: 36.2% Latino, 35.6% Black, 24.73 White, 0.5% Asian and 2.9% Two or More Races. Residents in these neighborhoods struggle with the everyday realities; high levels of poverty (27%) and high levels of unemployment (19.1%). In addition, nearly one-third (32.2%) of residents lack a high school diploma or GED.

Our weekly Farmer's Market helped increase healthy food access in food deserts and low-income communities, allowing residents to reap the benefits of having access to fresh, locally grown fruits and vegetables. According to 2014 survey results, nearly 50% of those surveyed reported shopping at the market every week, an increase from 39% in 2013. Survey data also showed that the availability of the farmers market allowed customers to eat more fruits and vegetables. In 2014, 69% reported eating more fruits and vegetables as a result of the farmers market, a 7% increase over 2013 results and a 15% increase over 2012 baseline data. In addition, we saw an increase in the number of individuals using food assistance benefits at the farmers market. In 2014, 37% reported that they "used some type of food assistance benefits to make their purchases," compared to 23% in 2013 and 33% in 2012.

Local farmers and vendors benefitted from this project through increased revenue as a result of an expanded customer base and increased sales. By actively targeting SNAP shoppers and encouraging them to come to the farmer's market to purchase their fruits and vegetables, we were able to introduce customers to the benefits of shopping at the farmers market. In addition, through the continued growth of our Veggie Van (mobile farmers market) we expanded distribution channels for 25 vendors in 2014, providing them with the increased direct-to-consumer sales and/or indirectly through sales to the Veggie Van. In 2012, the Veggie Van purchased just $10,504.97 worth of produce from small, local growers. In 2013, the Veggie Van purchased $27,163.85 from local growers. In 2014, the Y's Veggie Van purchased $63,883.28 of produce from local farmers, representing a 508% increase over 2012 purchases.

As outlined in the Lessons Learned Section, we faced far greater competition for vendors than originally anticipated, resulting in fewer vendors each week than originally planned (10 instead of the projected 25). With fewer vendors, those that did participate enjoyed greater sales. While all vendors benefited through their participation in the Farmers Market and/or sales to the Veggie Van, two farmers in particular stand out as stories of success for this project. Hope Farms is an incubator farm operated by refugee farmers from Burma and Bhutan. Money earned helps support the farmers and their families and enables them to use farming skills honed in their native countries. The ability to sell their produce at the Y's Farmer's Market and to the Veggie Van has greatly expanded the distribution channel for their crops, and has enabled them to expand the types of vegetables grown. Increased sales to the YMCA will allow current farmers to expand the size or their plot, and/or enable additional farmers to participate. (Grand Rapids Press article about Hope Farms attached)

A second vendor, Robin and Ed Goens' Produce have been with us for four years. Farming started out as a hobby for the couple, with Ed maintaining a full-time job. By becoming a vendor at the Y's Farmer's Market and a supplier to the Veggie Van, Ed has been able to quit his job and focus full time on the couple's farm. The Goens recently constructed a hoop house to extend their growing season, enabling them to increase growing capacity and supply more produce to our Veggie Van, which is ultimately sold to low income families in our community. (Copy of an article from the Rapidian featuring a story about the Goen's and other farmers market vendors is attached)

By bringing together local farmers and low income residents at our weekly market, we helped generate an interest among our customers to "buy local". This commitment to supporting local business is clearly demonstrated in the results of our surveys. In 2014, 42% survey respondents reporting that they made a trip to our downtown Y "specifically to shop at the farmer's market" and 53% reported shopping at the farmers market "in order to support local farmers". It is this mindset that helps not only the Y's farmers market but other farmers markets in the area as well.

In addition to those directly benefitting from the project, there were also those that received indirect benefits. These include local firms paid to do advertising and printing to promote the market, and area musicians who provided musical entertainment at the weekly market. In 2014, we utilized interns from a local college and universities to fill positions connected to the Farmer's Market (Food Preparation and Recipe Development, Marketing and Events, Youth Engagement, and Vendor and Customer Relations), providing students with valuable experience that will enhance their future careers aspirations.

Lessons Learned:

Discuss the lessons that were learned from completing the project. Lessons learned may have influenced the direction of the project, helped improve the process, and/or optimized the results. Sharing these experiences may be quite helpful to those seeking to learn from your experiences and to achieve similar results.

One challenge we faced was low vendor retention. While vendor surveys collected in 2013 indicated we could anticipate nearly 100% retention, several key vendors did not return in 2014. This situation led to the unexpected need to recruit new vendors. In addition, many of our vendors did not sign up for the entire season, resulting in vendor consistency from week to week. The loss of key vendors in 2014, coupled with lack of vendor consistency, led to disappointment among customers when products were not available. Such dissatisfaction could explain the decline in sales for 2014.

A second lesson learned while undertaking this project is that the competition has increased since our downtown location first began operating a farmers market in 2011. There are currently 20 Farmers Markets in Kent County. Six of them, including the new Downtown Market located less than a mile away, operate on Thursdays. While we target a different demographic than most other area farmer's markets, we are all in competition for the same vendors. Vendors often perceive that selling at a high-income market will automatically be more lucrative than at a low-income market, and commit their time and product elsewhere.

The large number of farmers markets, the increased competition for vendors, couples with decreased customer attendance and decreasing trends in sales has led the YMCA to discontinue our Farmers Market. Instead, we will continue investing in our Veggie Vans (mobile farmers market) which have experienced remarkable growth. The continued operation of our two Veggie Vans will provide local growers with a continued distribution channel for their fresh fruits and vegetables, and enable us to achieve our goal of increasing access to healthy foods in low-income communities. Our two Veggie Vans currently make 29 weekly stops in low-income neighborhoods in Grand Rapids and Muskegon County, providing year-round access to healthy food options. Like the farmers

market, customers can use food assistance benefits, including Double Up Food Bucks to make their purchases. One of the weekly Veggie Van stops in Grand Rapids is at the downtown YMCA (the location of our YMCA Farmers Market), which helps ensure that our customers have continued access to fresh produce.

Farmer's Market Billboard

Direct Mail Campaign-SNAP recipients

Posters for Surrounding Businesses

the rapidian
very local.

YMCA Farmers Market: supporting local growers, local businesses, local families

by YMCA of Greater Grand Rapids (YMCAofGR) on Thursday Jun 12th, 2014 08:30am in NONPROFITS

The YMCA Farmers Market continuing to educate consumers, build community and improve food access every Thursday from 3:00 to 7:00 p.m. at the downtown YMCA.

As it approaches its fourth season, the YMCA Farmers Market is continuing to educate consumers, build community and improve food access in Grand Rapids. Along with an array of locally produced food, the market offers its shoppers fun children's activities, a cooking demonstration that promotes the use of farm fresh ingredients and healthy recipes, live local music, and an opportunity to shop in a welcoming environment. The market is located in downtown Grand Rapids at the David D. Hunting YMCA and is open every Thursday from 3:00 to 7:00 p.m. from June through September.

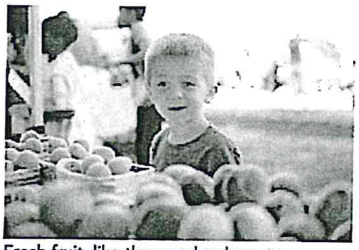
A child enjoys a fresh slice of orange at the YMCA Farmers Market /YMCA of Greater Grand Rapids

The market focuses on providing urbanites with access to Michigan grown produce and locally crafted food products such as bread, cheese, jam, and kombucha. With a wide variety of vendors, the market provides consumers with options that satisfy most shopping needs.

This season, market vendors include Goen's Produce, Cooked to Perfection, Grand Valley State University's Sustainable Agriculture Project, Funny Farm, Grassfields Cheese, Sweet Si Bon, as well as products from Bloom Ferments and Wealthy Street Bakery.

Children enjoy games, music, and more at the YMCA Farmers Market. /YMCA of Greater Grand Rapids

Vendors make up the heart of the operation at the YMCA Farmer's Market. Every Thursday they bring their stories, passions, and of course their delicious food to create a vibrant, unique and positive community experience. They see market days as a time to share their work with shoppers while building lasting relationships.



Fresh fruit, like the peaches here, are favorite among children at the YMCA Farmers Market. /YMCA of Greater Grand Rapids

(cc) BY-ND

Robin and Ed of Goen's Produce exude this sense of pride and community. Returning for their fourth season at the market, they have been farming in Allendale since 1979 and claim that farming is a part of their identity. Beginning as a hobby, their passion has become a business and provided them with many new learning opportunities and adventures. In addition to produce they have begun to sell prepared products such as jam and baked goods. This past season they built a hoop house to extend their growing season, offering them the opportunity to provide even more vegetables. They love the work that they do and enjoy making it a family affair. Together Robin and Ed plant, weed, harvest, and maintain their farm, putting in long hours every day. As far as the market goes, Robin and Ed are excited to be a part of the community. When asked what their favorite part of the market is they replied, "We love to see little kids pick out vegetables they like."

Grassfields Organic Cheese is a fifth generation family owned and operated farm. Since 1882 the Meerman family have been stewards of the same land, working to give customers the best product possible while treating their animals in a humane manner. The entire family plays a role in their business, from the actual farming to making the cheese and marketing. The family feels that by teaching their children how to farm they are helping them to grow in spirit and maturity. Working with animals allows them to feel a connection to the earth and understand the role that animals should play in the food system. Luke Meerman, a fifth generation farmer, encourages people to come and visit the farm, to see the animals, and to meet his family. This transparency allows people to gain an understanding of where their food comes from and how it is made. When asked what he loves about the market Meerman explained that, "I love connecting with people who care where their food comes from."

With many returning vendors such as the Goen's and Grassfields as well as several new products from places like Bloom Ferments and Wealthy Street Bakery, the YMCA Farmers Market is sure to provide a wide range of quality products while building community around both local food and local business.

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Finding Hope: Refugees find opportunities, community in new incubator farm

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on October 19, 2014 at 6:00 AM, updated October 19, 2014 at 12:41 PM

"It's a big blessing for my family." - Kharka Gurung, a Bhutan refugee and Hope Farms farmer

GRAND RAPIDS, MI – When farmers market customers ran their eyes over the colorful bounty produced at Hope Farms this season, they could appreciate the lush bunches of herbs, the Asian cabbages, and the slender green onions sold with just the right amount of snap in their stems.

But what those customers likely didn't see was the community blueprint that's brewing on a small plot of rented ground.

Bethany Christian Services launched Hope Farms as a place where refugees with agricultural backgrounds could transition their skills, making them marketable here.

They pay a small fee to farm, and the money they earn by selling their produce at farmers markets, within their communities and to local restaurants helps to supplement their family's income.

It started modestly, with just a handful of farmers. But as Hope Farms wraps up its inaugural year, organizers see deeper social and business connections in its future.

"The refugees are here," said project coordinator Alison Morgan. "They're already part of the community and people can benefit from broadening their views."

The local YMCA – whose Veggie Van and farmers market both hosted Hope Farms vendors this year – now wants to expand into other projects with the farm. And it's not the only group taking notice of the potential. A number of local land owners have offered their plots for farming, if the program expands.

Planting the seeds of hope

This year, four people were selected to kick off the program. All hailed from either Bhutan or Myanmar, and had spent time in **refugee camps** before being brought to West Michigan, with help from Bethany's resettlement program.

They all had farming experience, but making that translate here proved challenging.

Some had never seen mechanized irrigation systems before, and hadn't started plants in greenhouses. They fended off crop-munching deer, and worried when temperatures dipped sharply at the beginning of fall.

Then, too, was learning to farm for an American palate. Culturally, these farmers preferred the green taste of a pale tomato. They hadn't worked with plants like arugula or kale. And when they harvested their beans, they liked the pods bulging toward tough.

But the farmers discovered their local customers wanted their tomatoes ripe and their beans young and tender.

They will take those lessons learned into next year's crops.

After all these farmers have been through to get here – being beaten, forced from their homes and persecuted in their native land – such changes seem small. Learning a new way to ply their trade is a welcome opportunity to help provide for their families.

"To be a part of Hope Farms, I am a person with big luck,"
Kharka Gurung, 48, of Grand Rapids told translator Phil Sunuwar. "It's a big blessing for my family."

Gurung, who arrived here in 2012, was raised **in Bhutan**. He said his life was frequently threatened there, and he was once beaten for an accidental diversion from traditional garb - an incident that has left him in pain ever since.

Later at a refugee camp in Nepal, Gurung said he remembers feeling loss when fellow refugees told him he would never be able to farm again in the U.S., but be forced to work in factories.

And when he finally arrived here, his health began to fail and he could not work at all. Then came Hope Farms.

Each farmer this year paid $150 to work one quarter acre on land rented from the Holland Home Breton Woods independent retirement facilities, at 2772 Pfeiffer Woods Drive.

The refugees either work their farm plot as a second job, or use it as supplemental income if another family member is already employed. They sell most of the food they grow. They keep the rest for themselves.

While the money Gurung earned farming this year isn't quite enough to pay for his needed medicine, the produce he brings home helps feed his family, he said.

After learning how to freeze produce for the winter, Gurung used some of his earnings to buy a new freezer so he can stock up on what he's grown this summer.

"Now as I start planting, I gain a new hope," he said. "I feel like next year, I'm going to do really good."

Thawng Mu, 48, of Kentwood, told interpreter Eddie Moo that in addition to supplemental income, the farm work helps him stay active and lets him express his passion for agriculture. Mu, originally from **Myanmar**, arrived here in 2008.

Motioning to the farm's irrigation system, That Wah, 56, of Grand Rapids, said it was difficult to learn different tools, but ultimately she's happy it's made her work easier.

"I'm old," she said to interpreter Moo with a laugh, explaining why she likes farming as a less strenuous way to earn money.

The Hope Farms project has been a long time coming for Bethany Christian Services, which aids about 300 refugees in area resettlement every year, former project coordinator Aaron Russo said.

It was conceived out of "sheer necessity" about two years ago. Russo said he was drawn to the idea of a farming project run by refugees because of the difficulties they faced in finding employment once they arrived.

Lack of some technical skills, and cultural and language barriers often leave refugees struggling to find work - no matter their level of education or work experience in their home countries, said Dona Abbott, Grand Rapids branch director for Bethany Christian Services.

Frustratingly, many refugees, particularly those from Bhutan and Myanmar like the Hope Farm workers, have agricultural backgrounds, but seasonal work and cultural differences make translating those skills to U.S. farming difficult, Russo said.

Abbott said for most people, refugees or not, starting a small farm isn't practical due to the number of resources necessary.

"Even to get jobs on large farms -- there aren't a lot out there," she said. "Many area farms are farmed by families."

Other difficulties include the differences in farming techniques, such as the U.S. penchant for using fertilizer and pesticide, Abbott said. Then comes marketing the produce. It's something many refugees never had to do themselves.

Bethany Christian Services and the Hope Farms project offer the benefit of facing these challenges in a controlled environment with the help needed to succeed, the farmers said.

Hope Farms met its goal of about $1,000 earned in formal sales per farmer so far this year, said project coordinator Morgan.

The goal is that after three years, Hope Farm workers will graduate to their own farm, if they choose, with a market already seeking their goods.

For now, the group of farmers and coordinators are facing the obstacles as they come.

Gurung said despite taking six months of English classes, he has yet to grasp it - especially enough for some work settings. Now, with the help of farm manager Scott Townley, he's starting to pick up small bits of English.

Townley said cultural differences between the farmers and their customers have made for good conversation starters.

This year's crop of spiky-looking bitter melons, long eggplants and even white eggplants draw a lot of curiosity, Townley said.

And these veggie conversations are a plus, as refugees desperately need community support while continuing to adapt, Abbott said.

"They want to be independent and self-sufficient," Abbott said. "Given the opportunity and a little time, they're very successful."

These farmers market conversations also open people's eyes to the refugees who flow into West Michigan, Bethany leader say.

Michigan had the third-highest number of refugee arrivals during 2013, after Texas and California, with 4,651 arrivals, according to **the Office of Immigration Statistics in the U.S. Department of Homeland Security**.

Eventually, Bethany hopes to work with more refugee farmers and land, Morgan said.

Plans are still being drawn up for the 2015 growing season, but it's possible the current farmers might be given more land to work.

For now, Morgan said it's simply impressive how far they've come.

"With all the barriers, to see the farmland go from nothing to what it is now is phenomenal."

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YMCA VEGGIE VAN

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YMCA OF GREATER GRAND RAPIDS

475 Lake Michigan Dr. NW

July 14, 2014

grymca.org/community-programs

CLICK HERE TO SEE WHAT'S AVAILABLE ON THE VEGGIE VANS THIS WEEK. CLICK HERE TO VIEW OUR SCHEDULES.

MICHIGAN BLUEBERRIES

Seasonal Produce Spotlight

Every year, blueberries indicate that we're in the height of summer— the days stretch on and on, the hot sun lingers in the center of the blue sky, and the memory of winter is impossibly distant. Blueberries are nostalgic, sweet little things, and here in West Michigan, we're approaching the crest of their growing season.

Michigan is the number-one state in blueberry production, with growers producing 100 million pounds each year. Michigan farmers grow more than 20 blueberry varieties, all of which tend to thrive in sandy soils.

The Michigan blueberry season will wrap up toward the middle of next month, but you can enjoy the bold flavor and nutritional benefits of Michigan blueberries year-round. Buying blueberries in bulk now and freezing them for later is a great way to save money and support our local farmers. For best results, place unwashed blueberries on a baking sheet in a single layer. Place in the freezer overnight. Once frozen, place in labeled, freezer-safe bags.

For a healthy alternative to traditional blueberry pie, try the no-bake cobbler below. Because honestly, who wants to turn on the oven in July?

NO-BAKE BLUEBERRY COBBLER

Ingredients

- 1 cup pecans
- 1 cup walnuts
- 1/2 cup pitted dates
- 2 Tbs. butter
- Pinch of sea salt
- 1/2 tsp. cinnamon
- 4 cups fresh blueberries
- 2 Tbs. honey

Directions

- Place pecans and walnuts in food processor and blend until well chopped
- Add in dates, butter, sea salt, and cinnamon, and blend until the mixture is crumbly
- Spread crumble mixture into a pie dish
- Place 2 cups of blueberries and honey in food processor and blend to a syrup
- Pour syrup over nut crumble mix
- Top with remaining 2 cups of blueberries

U-PICK: LINDBERG'S BLUEBERRIES

Location: 14730 84th Ave. Coopersville, MI 49404; Ready-Pick berries also available on the Veggie Van or at the YMCA Farmers Market

Owners: Brenda and Jeff Lindberg, with the help of their children Bill, Becky, and Sara

Days of Operation: Monday—Saturday, beginning July 18th

Prices: U-Pick: $1.50/lb; Ready-Pick: $2.60/lb

Contact: (616) 677-3889 or LindbergBrenda@gmail.com

Lindberg Family Centennial Farm

QUESTIONS, COMMENTS, IDEAS?

Contact Sara Vander Zanden, Healthy Living Agriculture Manager, at 616.855.9680 or svanderzanden@grymca.org

YMCA VEGGIE VAN

YMCA FARMERS MARKET PHOTOS

YMCA VEGGIE VAN PHOTOS

Farmers Market Customer Survey

FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT
FOR HEALTHY LIVING
FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

All survey responses are voluntary and will remain anonymous.

1. **How often do you shop at the YMCA Farmers Market?**
   □ Weekly
   □ Every other week
   □ Once a month
   □ Today only

2. **Are you at the farmers market because you were at the YMCA already, or did you make a special trip to shop at the farmers market?**
   □ I am at the YMCA as a member
   □ I am a YMCA employee
   □ I made the trip specifically for the farmers market
   □ Other _____

3. **How much do you plan to spend at the farmers market today?**
   □ Less than $5 □ $5 - $10 □ $11 - $20 □ $21 - $50 □ More than $50

4. **How do you plan to pay for your purchases at the farmers market?** (check all that apply)
   □ Cash
   □ Debit/Credit
   □ Bridge Card/Food Stamps
   □ Double Up Food Bucks
   □ WIC Project Fresh/WIC CVB
   □ Summer EBT for Children
   □ Market FRESH/Senior Project FRESH
   □ YMCA coupon

5. **How far did you travel to get to the market?**
   □ I was here already
   □ Less than 5 blocks
   □ 5 blocks to half mile
   □ Half mile to 3 miles
   □ 4 to 10 miles
   □ More than 10 miles

6. **What is your main reason for buying fruits and vegetables at the farmers market?**
   □ Product quality and freshness
   □ Low prices
   □ Convenient location
   □ Support local farmers
   □ Support the YMCA
   □ I do not plan on purchasing fruits and vegetables
   □ Other _____

7. **Would you say that the availability of the YMCA Farmers Market has allowed you to eat more fresh fruits and vegetables?**
   □ Yes □ No □ No; I normally eat fresh fruits and vegetables anyway

All survey responses will remain anonymous.
Thank you for your participation in the YMCA Farmers Market Customer Survey. Have a wonderful day!

8. When you do not purchase your fruits and vegetables at the YMCA Farmers Market, where do you get them?

- □ Large grocery store (Meijer, Family Fare, etc.)
- □ Neighborhood grocery store (Kingma's, etc.)
- □ Corner store/gas station
- □ Other farmers market
- □ Garden
- □ Food pantry
- □ I only purchase them here
- □ Other _____

9. How did you find out about the YMCA Farmers Market?

- □ Flyer or poster in nearby business
- □ Billboard
- □ Facebook
- □ Coupon
- □ Friend
- □ YMCA member newsletter/email
- □ Yard signs outside YMCA
- □ Saw the market while walking by
- □ Other _____

10. What can we do to improve the market?_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

YOUR ANSWERS TO THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS WILL HELP US INTERPRET THE RESULTS OF THIS SURVEY AND WILL BE KEPT STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL

11. Please check the box that best describes your race/ethnicity

- □ African American
- □ Asian
- □ Hispanic/Latino
- □ Other:_____
- □ White
- □ Native American
- □ Multi-Racial

12. What is your annual household income?

- □ less than $23,000
- □ $23,000 - $39,999
- □ $40,000 - $59,999
- □ $60,000 - $79,999
- □ $80,000 or more

All survey responses will remain anonymous.

Thank you for your participation in the YMCA Farmers Market Customer Survey. Have a wonderful day!