

URBAN VOICE

The Next Generation of Environmental Activists: Getting Milwaukee's Youth Involved in the Community

By Giovanni Grippe & Nyambura Njoroge

Millennials and Gen Zs have grown up aware of the climate crisis. With fading hope of stopping climate change, many young people are unsure of their place in solving it. Environmental organizations recognize that today's youth are the next environmental activists and push for more engagement from them to continue their work. The city of Milwaukee and its communities are not exempt from the dangers of the climate and environmental crises. Therefore, the city's environmental organizations are taking action to ensure that the youth is ready to help. There is no shortage of volunteer opportunities. However, there is a need for more community involvement.

For years now, several young environmental activists have gained traction globally, spreading awareness to all generations about the current state of the planet. One of the most prominent activists is Greta Thunberg from Sweden who, along with other young activists, continues to inspire change by speaking out against climate inaction. However, one does not need to join a global alliance to help the cause.



Local Answers to Global Issues

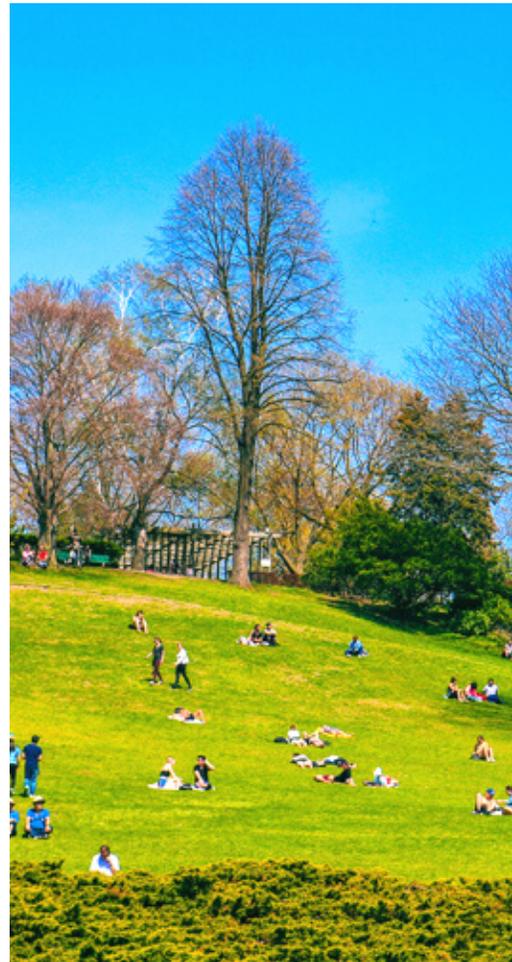
Milwaukee is one of the top five most segregated cities in America which is reflected in its geography. For example, predominantly white neighborhoods are able to raise more money independently to better maintain and equip their greenspaces than predominantly Black and Brown neighborhoods. This impacts youth of color, as it discourages them from interacting with their greenspaces and undermines safety in their neighborhoods.

Nearby Nature Milwaukee is one of the organizations that deeply cares about the disproportionate impact of the environmental crisis on communities of color. That is why it targets the majority-Black communities of Lincoln Creek and Hopkins Hollow in Milwaukee. Nearby Nature works with the community to help them preserve their own greenspaces and waterways.

To attract Black youth, Nearby Nature prioritizes hands-on learning. Through their Youth Outdoors Education Program, they teach African American youth about environmental activism in schools and neighborhood centers. To Detaya Johnson, Nearby Nature's program director, the goal is to "activate the community through the youth so our future can also be involved in this process."

Walnut Way targets Black and Brown communities as well. Located in the Lindsay Heights neighborhood, the organization focuses on improving their community through neighborhood events and welcoming volunteers to work in the urban gardens. "We have one planet and it should be shaped and shared by all," said Antonio Butts, the executive director of Walnut Way.

Their program Growing Youth Leadership brings in high school interns to grow and sell their own vegetables. This program is held yearly and there are five current interns. Walnut Way prioritizes young volunteers as they believe they are the key to sustaining the changes they have made within the past 20 years. Butts believes, "Succession is the key to everything."



Other urban farms like Alice's Garden are essential to the Lindsay Heights community and Milwaukee as a whole. Their goal is to reclaim the process of gardening and share it with the urban area. Like Walnut Way, Alice's Garden welcomes people from all over Milwaukee, but specifically people from the nearby neighborhoods to experience hands-on gardening. They have designated special times to allow kids to learn about urban farming.

Outside Milwaukee, there are other opportunities for aspiring young environmentalists. Shelby Kail from Burlington, WI, is doing her part to spread awareness to her classmates and community. As a senior member of Burlington High School's Environmentalism Club, she is brainstorming projects to start in her community. In previous years, the club focused on sustainability, holding school supply drives, as well as putting up baskets to recycle excess food from student lunches.

Kail wants to bring awareness to the crisis, as she is disappointed with the lack of advertisement on social media. "Not everyone's a celebrity," she said. "But we still need to bring better awareness of this problem to the public."

“We have one planet and it should be shaped and shared by all”

Opportunities for youth involvement exist, but more initiatives are needed. It is now up to the young people to apply themselves to the cause, whether that be volunteering at neighborhood gardens, joining community cleanups, or raising money for accessible parks. Adam Carr, the director of strategic partnerships with Milwaukee Parks Foundation, supports greater youth involvement as well. "For young people, it's going to be the world in which you live," he said. "You've inherited the problem. So it's critical to volunteer and help out. I'd argue that it's not a choice."



All the organizations covered in this article are Milwaukee-based and have environmental and community-oriented goals. They are able to improve their communities by holding neighborhood cleanups, community events, and fundraisers.

Get Involved!

There are plenty of events and volunteer opportunities with the organizations talked about in this article, as well as others in Milwaukee. Click the links below to see how you can make a positive impact on the environment and your community.

[Milwaukee Parks Foundation](#) - Go Green for Parks event on September 19th from 5-8 p.m.

[Groundwork Milwaukee -Garden Network](#)
Workdays range between Tuesday - Friday, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. & 3- 7p.m. Saturdays, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.

[Walnut Way](#) -Activities include watering, weeding, planting trees, mulching, installing garden beds, clearing vacant lots, clean up, canning, harvesting and weighing crops.

[Alice's Garden](#) invites volunteers from June to September, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Mondays and Wednesdays, and 6-8 p.m. on Mondays and Tuesdays.

Walnut Way works within their neighborhood, Lindsay Heights to build strong relationships with the residents and encourage an interest in improving their quality of life. Their main focus is growing their community through environmental stewardship. Volunteers can visit their garden, help plant, de-weed, and get background on the organization and their goals. For more information, their website is [Walnut Way](#) and you can contact them at info@walnutway.org.

Nearby Nature works to build their community of Lincoln Creek and Hopkins Hollow. They promote stewardship, educate youth on environmentalism, and address the racism faced by Black and Brown people in the environmentalism community. For more information, their website is [Nearby Nature Milwaukee](#) & you can contact them at contact@nearbynaturemke.org

Milwaukee Parks Foundation (MPF) works to improve parks and ensure well kept natural areas are accessible to people from every area. MPF works closely with Milwaukee County Parks in improving the city's parks and raising money to maintain them. For more information, their website is [Milwaukee Parks Foundation](#) and you can contact them at info@mkeparksfoundation.org.