

## Alums' nonprofit brings fresh food and opportunities to impoverished Denver neighborhood

By Greg Glasgow



The road to transformation for one of Denver's poorest neighborhoods began half a world away — in Nicaragua, where a 2006 service-learning project inspired two University of Denver students — economics major Eric Kornacki (BA '09) and criminology major Joseph Teipel (BA '07) — to fight poverty at home.

“Joseph and I went down to Nicaragua for three weeks on this service-learning project, over winter break, and we both were impacted by the poverty we saw,” Kornacki says. “During the trip, we started to have a conversation about what would it look like if, post-graduation, we came back and started doing work around that issue. A lot of ideas came out of that, then we had to come back and finish school, and those ideas were tabled for a bit. But then, after graduation, we said, ‘hey, let’s actually try to do this now, while we’re young. Let’s start a nonprofit and figure it out.’”

As its name suggests, that nonprofit, [Re:Vision International](#), started in 2007 with a global mission, but it took on a local focus when Kornacki and Teipel learned of the extreme poverty in Westwood, a food desert that has Denver's highest rate of childhood obesity and an average annual income of \$11,000. When the pair discovered that limited access to fresh, healthy food was one of the area's biggest problems, they developed their signature Re:Farm program, which builds backyard gardens and community urban farms for Westwood residents.

Re:Vision started the gardening program in 2009, teaching seven families to grow their own fresh produce. In 2013 the organization worked with 200 families; this year it plans to work with 300 more. Next up for the nonprofit is launching a community-owned grocery store — the only grocery store in the neighborhood — that will employ Westwood residents and purchase surplus produce from the Re:Farm gardens.

Re:Vision also is helping to administer a \$1 million grant from the Colorado Health Foundation's Healthy Places Initiative for built-environment improvements — sidewalks, streets, etc. — to increase healthy lifestyles and healthy living in Westwood.

“When we started working here, there was very little attention on this side of town, and that’s been the case for 30 or 40 years,” Teipel says. “And not solely due to our work, but as a result of a lot of things that helped build momentum, all of a sudden Westwood is one of the Colorado Health Foundation's top three communities in the state to invest this money in. We finally feel like, ‘Wow, we’re turning the tide here.’”

In addition to the Colorado Health Foundation grant, Re:Vision has received funding from the National Convergence Partnership, which gave the group \$80,000 to explore gardening as a violence-prevention strategy for youth, and the Denver Office of Economic Development. In 2013 the organization received the Slow Money Entrepreneur of the Year Award and a \$300,000 Community Food Project Grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Kornacki and Teipel are quick to give the University of Denver credit for the experience that inspired them to start the organization.

“My experience at DU absolutely shaped my life in a way that had I not gone there, this organization wouldn’t exist,” Kornacki says. “I think what DU offers its students, which impacted me tremendously, is that ability to study abroad. There are some very forward-thinking and challenging service-learning programs that really immerse you in issues of poverty and global justice — things that, for me, expanded my worldview in a way that no longer did I see myself and my own self-interest isolated from what takes place in the rest of the world. I really felt called and compelled to go out and do something about it.”

*[Photo: Joseph Teipel, left, and Eric Kornacki are the founders of Re:Vision International. by Wayne Armstrong]*