The Oasis Center Nutrition Program
Reflections by Elizabeth Coyle, Cal Turner Fellow, Divinity student

Introduction:

The Cal Turner Program acknowledges lack of food access and nutrition education in urban Nashville, which contribute to the concentrate of health risks in lower-income residential areas. Thus, the Oasis Center Nutrition Project is designed to be an on-going educational and experiential program, developed collaboratively by Cal Turner Fellows and the Oasis Center’s Emergency Shelter for at-risk youth. Over the course of the year, Fellows have developed replicable, informal curricula based on the films King Corn and Supersize Me. They have worked with teenage residents to shop for local, sustainable food and then prepare a community meal. They have helped implement and maintain a community garden. In these and other ways, the Cal Turner program is providing youth with informal nutrition education and instilling in Oasis residents an interest in food production and consumption to the betterment of their minds and bodies.

Programs and Projects:

Movie Nights (twice):
During the fall semester (2010), our team of Cal Turner Fellows developed two movie nights, designed to build relationships with the Oasis Center residents and staff, as well as informally educate youth on health and food production/consumption. Each event centered on a film (either King Corn or Supersize Me) but also included introductory activities, discussion questions, and concluding conversation. These nights were a great way to introduce youth, in an informal and non-threatening way, to principles of food production and consumption, with an emphasis on nutrition. It was also a chance to build relationships with staff and residents.

Farmer’s Market and Dinner (twice):
During the spring semester (2011), we brought Oasis Center residents to the downtown Nashville Farmer’s Market in order to shop for fresh, local, organic food. These food purchases were in conjunction with menu-planning for dinner the following Tuesday. Thus, residents had a real investment in their purchases and an interest in the food. This field trip enabled students to interact with local farmers and community members. They were empowered to make their own food choices and were given the resources to buy healthy food.
A few days later, we joined Oasis Center residents and staff in preparing our meal. This gave one particular resident a chance to become “Chef Trey,” utilizing his culinary skills and taking pride in his work. This was a chance to build community around food preparation. In addition, it was a chance for the residents to eat local, healthy food and learn informally about the importance of a balanced diet.

Gardening:
During the spring semester (2011), as individuals and in pairs, we worked with the staff and residents to plant and maintain the Oasis Center’s garden, begun last year in
conjunction with previous Fellows. Personally, I found the garden to be a great place to get to know residents one-on-one – it was a non-threatening place for residents to open up and engage with me. One Sunday afternoon, a resident and I planted tomatoes, corn, and lettuce, in addition to watering. More importantly, the garden was a site where there was consistent work to be done and (I imagine) will continue to be an ongoing project in the future for next year’s Fellows.

**Strengths of this Project/Recommendations:**

The Oasis Center Nutrition Project is a simple, straightforward partnership with an agency that is practically on the Vanderbilt campus. We have developed a strong working relationship with Lucie Stone, who is enthusiastic about our continued participation and ideas. The Oasis Center is a place that can easily tap into our resources and vice versa. They are very open to new ideas and have flexibility in their daily schedule to do various field trips, projects, and the like. There is still much room for growth for the future.

My recommendations for next year would be a continuation of previous activities and the development of additional programs. You are welcome to use our movie lesson plans and use those as a jumping-off point for relationship-building. I personally think that the Farmer’s Market/Dinner was the best activity we did all year, and this can be repeated many times throughout the year with various residents. I think there is room for growth in terms of larger programmatic elements.

**Weaknesses of this Project/Recommendations:**

By its nature, the Oasis Center Emergency Shelter (on 17th) has residents who are transitory – in fact, residents can only stay for up to two weeks. This meant that we could not develop long-term relationships with young people. With this in mind, I propose forging an additional relationship with the Youth Opportunity Center (another branch of the Oasis Center on Charlotte Ave.). Here, you may find more long-term residents and further staff with which to partner. In addition, there is more space to work in. Finally, it is this part of the Oasis Center that Michelle Bukowski, staff member of the Cal Turner program, is invested in – she is a valuable resource who could be a more integral partner in projects.

**Conclusion:**

The Oasis Center Nutrition Program has so much room for further growth and development, as well as a firm base from which to work. It is a strong partnership between Oasis staff, particularly Lucie Stone, and Cal Turner fellows. Given the promising work that has been done this year, as well as the year before, I strongly suggest that this project continue next year. Please know that I am willing to be a resource or consultant for groups in the future: elizabethacoyle@yahoo.com. Thank you, Cal Turner program, for a great opportunity!