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# Chilling Vegetables, Warming Hearts

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by Anna Ramsey, National Winner of the 2014 **Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes**



A gooey glop of tar landed in the frost-bitten folds of my left ear. Smoke clouds billowed their way into the crisp evening, competing with the ominous glow of fluorescent street lights. If we did not finish coating the root cellar tonight, the first snowfall would snatch

any chance of completion. I pried my un-recognizable fingers

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away from my paintbrush, leaped from the ladder, gulped some lukewarm tea, and told myself to toughen up—I had to finish tonight.

98.6 ° F keeps a person functioning at the basic level, but true survival requires three additional forms of warmth: one must feel included, properly fueled, and in community. That is why I am an advocate for food justice— equal access to healthy food. Growing nutritious produce is critical to humanitarian and environmental responsibilities we have as citizens. Moreover, a healthy diet is vitally important for physical and emotional stability. Four years ago, I had meager experience with the term “food justice.” Growing up in a household with food security, I had little knowledge of what lay beyond my own colorful plate. While flipping through *The Vermont Standard*, Woodstock’s local newspaper one afternoon, I found myself drawn towards an article about a local, teen-run non-profit called “Change the World Kids.” Enticed by the pictures of “big-kid” idols carrying heaping vegetable crates into the local food shelf, I joined.

My first group gardening job included picking crisp green beans, unearthing long, skinny carrots, and flicking potato bugs into a can of soapy water. Organically grown and nourished by local cow manure, these vegetables smelled of rich Vermont soil. After filling our seven crates, we pulled into the food shelf parking lot, where I was amazed to see the crowd already waiting. I had just enough time to unhitch my seatbelt before our truck was swarmed with smiling people, eager to help unload. I still did not understand what was so astonishing about our delivery. This is a food shelf, it has vegetables, right? But then I realized, walking into the food shelf, I was like a painter. Our vegetables were not only the sole fresh produce, but also a palette of color in a basement of browns and grays. Realizing that our group’s delivery of seven modest vegetable crates was the only source of fresh food, we noticed especially during winter months, a number

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of people in our community live primarily on starchy pastas and breads, without access to fresh food. As a result, we raised this concern at our next group meeting. As committed leaders, we had the power to give every citizen in our community year-round access to fresh produce. The best way to do so? Build a Root Cellar.

Deep down, I knew this type of construction project was a reach for our small numbers. However, determined to prove our true potential, I decided to co-chair the Root Cellar Committee. We visited root cellars in the area, researched the most effective building techniques, and



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reached out to local contractors and structural engineers who warmly agreed to help. With our building plan completed, I successfully presented the blue-prints at our local Design and Developmental Review Board meetings to gain town approval. Construction began Spring of 2012 with an organized crew weed-whacking and clearing the site. Our group was determined to do as much of the work as possible. From chipping away at unexpected ledges to dragging buckets of retaining wall cement up ladders in the pouring rain, I definitely sacrificed body heat from time to time. Nevertheless, a unique warmth in my heart prevailed.

Last fall, one hundred packed crates of Change the World Kids garden produce lined our root cellar shelves. In a few

short weeks, we will restock our bins with hundreds of pounds of this year's produce. This passion is the core and fuel for my own pursuits in science, health and medicine. In figuring out how to better feed others, I have fueled myself.

*Anna Ramsey, age 18, of Vermont, has been named a national winner of the 2014 **Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes**. Each year, the Barron Prize celebrates twenty-five inspiring, public-spirited young people from all across America who have made a significant positive difference to people and our planet. The top fifteen winners each receive a \$5,000 cash award to support their service work or higher education. For more information please visit*

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