

# SOWING SEEDS OF LEARNING

*Master gardener sows life lessons with Leadership Class of 2012*

By Steven Nester

**A**bsolute synergy: a leadership class; an overgrown community garden; a national day of helping others; and a master gardener with a vision.

For 24 years, Leadership McKinney, a program of the McKinney Chamber of Commerce, has brought scores of forward-thinking residents to the front lines of civic and volunteer action in the community. By introducing them to town leaders, familiarizing them with the issues of a diverse and growing community, and instilling in them a practical knowledge of how to work within the human infrastructure of a city government and the citizenry it serves, Leadership McKinney has ensured that generations of community activists and civic leaders will be prepared to serve.





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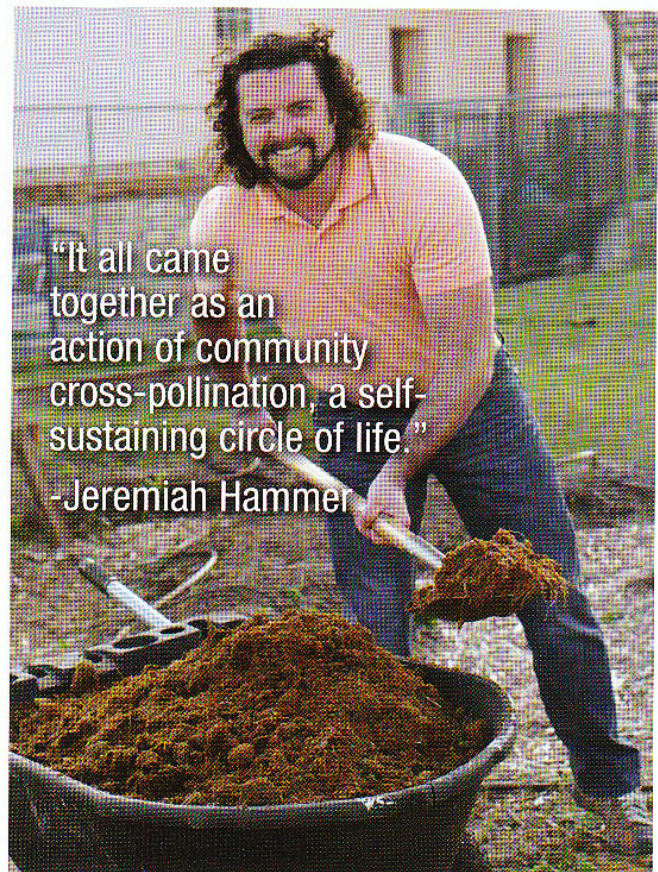
## Preparing to Serve

"The program was started by the McKinney Chamber of Commerce to grow a pool of qualified people who could run for public office and lead the town into the future," says Deb Fitzgerald, Director of Leadership Development. The first class was comprised of 10 people, but has grown to almost 30 per session. Past graduates include McKinney Mayor Brian Loughmiller, Brookhaven College President Dr. Thom Chesney, and former Councilwoman Gilda Garza, among many others.

"Since then," says Fitzgerald, "Leadership McKinney has become a recognized program with the goal of helping McKinney's most precious resource, its citizens, get plugged into the community." Leadership McKinney is also a stepping stone to the various city boards and commissions, many of which depend upon volunteers. The ultimate goal is to make a great community even better, and this success relies on the many perspectives and talents citizens can bring to it.

"The class is a snapshot of McKinney," says Fitzgerald. "We want a diverse group of people. We want bankers, teachers, CPAs, stay-at-home moms. We want the group to reflect the diversity that is present in a city that is built upon viewpoints."

The course runs year-long, and attendees meet with town leaders, take field trips, and get to know the ins and outs of city government. While there's classroom time, the program is quick to put the book learning to practical use. Each leadership class in session is assigned a project to complete on McKinney Make a Difference Day. Sponsored by Volunteer McKinney Center,



"It all came  
together as an  
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cross-pollination, a self-  
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-Jeremiah Hammer





Lane prepares the soil for planting at Holy Family School's Community Garden.

Make a Difference Day is the largest annual national day of action to help others. Previous local projects have included refurbishing houses, landscaping the SPCA facility, and painting and cleaning Chestnut Square.

## Perpetuating the Positive

In fall 2011 the current leadership class undertook a community project that couldn't help but perpetuate the positive – a renovation and update of the Holy Family School. Torchmark executive and Leadership McKinney participant Scott Elliot was part of the team that went to work at Holy Family, and he says that watching McKinney volunteers rise to action was an inspiring sight. "The project at Holy Family School was one of the best team efforts I've ever been blessed to have been a part of. When we visited the school to see the kids after the project was completed, we realized what an awesome service we had provided. I can't say enough good about this program."

The team landscaped, added a computer center and cleaned up the parking lot and playground. They also set in motion a plan to rejuvenate the school's once-blooming vegetable garden and make it self-sustaining. Team members put their heads together and networked the McKinney grapevine to put that part of the project together.

## It Went Like This

McKinney businessman Jeremiah Hammer is a master gardener and resourceful activist with a garden across the street from St. Peter's Episcopal Church, where the local Kiwanis Club meets.

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*Above: Caroline enjoys working with volunteers at Holy Family School's community garden. Right: This kid-friendly work shed proudly displays the names of supporters who recognize the importance of the life lessons learned through this program.*

Cindy Schneible is the director of the McKinney Community Development Corporation and a Leadership McKinney class member. Kiwanis Club members who happened to be involved in Leadership McKinney thought the Holy Family School was a worthy project, but they needed someone who could garden. They soon took notice of Hammer's tiny patch of green and began to wonder.

### Community Cross-Pollination

When Hammer met Schneible at a meeting of volunteers to discuss a community garden elsewhere in town, she asked him to assist with the rehabilitation of Holy Family's. Hammer jumped at the chance, rising to the challenge with zeal and expertise. Hammer's garden had been

created out of a need to divert excess rain-water from his property. Instead of allowing it to run into the gutter, he decided to repurpose it by using it for an organic garden. Being asked to help fit in with a much bigger picture that Hammer sees.

"It all came together as an action of community cross-pollination, a self-sustaining circle of life," says Hammer. "The group saw what I did with the garden at my house, and then I took on the once-thriving garden at Holy Family School. This is all about how a barren piece of land can be revitalized. With Leadership McKinney we put together the resources to get half the garden done."







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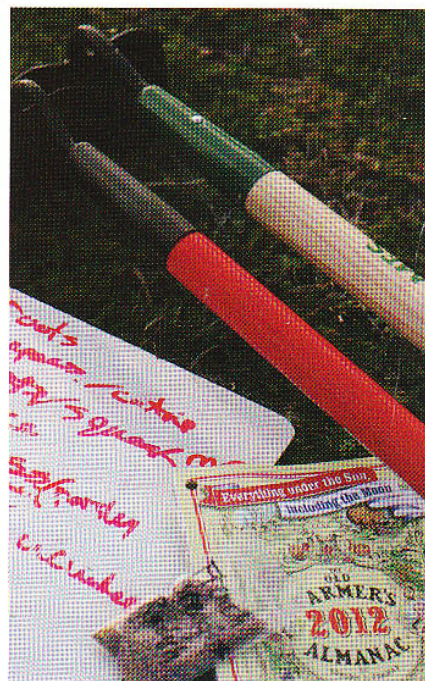
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Seeds donated by an heirloom nursery in Austin were planted to provide the first crop.

The garden goes beyond nourishing the body, says Hammer, by providing plenty of food for thought, as well. It's all about the kids and what they can learn. It's also about making the most of what is at hand – whether people or plants – and having realistic expectations. The goal the first year was to just get something to grow. Mission accomplished, as radishes sprang from the soil.

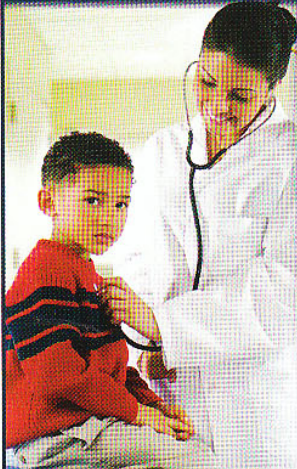
### The Self-Sustaining Circle

During the winter, Hammer kept busy by writing a curriculum for the children at Holy Family, explaining how to plant, sow, grow and weed. Also taking place during the chill of winter was indoor seed sprouting with seeds donated from an heirloom nursery in Austin. Hammer plans to add more root crop vegetables this spring along with tomatoes. In March they'll be transplanted outdoors. The self-sustaining circle will continue, Hammer says, even after the crop is harvested and eaten.

The donated seeds were sown to provide the first crop. Seeds from the first harvest this fall will be reallocated and used to plant crops for next year. Long-term plans include serving what's grown to



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students in the school cafeteria. For now, it's one step at a time as Hammer tempers his aspirations with cautious optimism. "This garden has another two to three years before it's completed. We want every row to produce consistently," he says.

Once the seeds are planted this spring, Hammer would like to see the children get engaged from the beginning of the process. That way, the students learn that the incremental steps of gardening are actually life-long lessons on planning, hard work and self-sufficiency.

The garden and what it teaches already fits into the school curriculum, says Holy School Board Chair Sara Thomas. "The children are learning about where food comes from and how it grows," Thomas says. "They use fine and gross motor skills by grasping and using the gardening tools, making rows, and planting the tiny seeds."

Success goes beyond harvest time, Hammer says. "I hope kids can see the fact that not all food comes wrapped in layers of packaging from the store. I think I'll have succeeded with this project when I can see kids teaching other kids. The overlying message is for kids to make time to be interested in things, to be aware of the world around them because they can make changes that are good for everyone."

*About the author: Steven Nester is an educator and freelance writer who hosts Poets of the Tabloid Murder, a mystery author interview show that may be heard on Public Radio.*

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