

# profile

## Rosalyn McMullin

COMMUNITY EDUCATOR, ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES



**B**efore coming to Cornell Cooperative Extension, sixteen years ago, I was a parent volunteer, doing outreach within my community. I was working with other parents to help support our community and our children through different vehicles via fundraising, raising money for trips for our children and getting resources in our community. I had a young child in preschool at the time. I worked in various jobs (Bronx Zoo, Country Music Maz, etc.). Some of my past work is what led me to where I'm at now. My professional background is in the areas of gardening, horticulture, recruiting volunteers, and teaching adults and youth through environmental issues education.

When Garden Mosaics got started, I was working with Cornell extension implementing environmental issues education programs. I was teaching or interacting with youth or volunteers to make sure the program was being delivered properly. One of the main goals of Garden Mosaics was to engage the youth and community gardeners to learn about gardening from diverse cultures, including learning about sustainable practices that could be of use. A personal objective I had was bringing the university faculty, staff, and students who are part of Cornell University to New York City to interact with the gardeners, youth, and volunteers, to see how we could all interact together for a common goal. I personally wanted to see that happen.

My role in the process has been as an educator for the youth, doing recruitment of volunteers and providing some community support. I was fortunate enough to live in one of the communities where the project was being conducted. I've done marketing and recruiting in my role as a community educator. My title is community educator in Environmental Issues and in Nutrition and Health for NYC programs. I think it matches what I do whether I'm delivering programs of nutrition and health or whether I'm delivering environmental issues programs to the community for the youth, volunteers, and participants. My role is to go out, recruit and bring into whatever project we're doing some volunteers, adult participants, and youth to see how we can all work together.

This has a lot to do with program marketing, too. Maybe there's some kind of community outreach program out there that we have to network with so we can make sure that we're really reaching the right audiences in order to deliver the program that's needed. It's a form of marketing. You're selling yourself. You want people to buy into what you have. That's how I look at it. The program's location and funds set the criteria for the audiences. It can be youth of a certain age, adult participants or volunteers who live in an area where we need to be delivering programs.

Both Veronique and I were doing outreach community support. She might have touched base with the community board person to find out what kind of support people they have in the

**Profile developed by H el ene Gr egoire and Rosalyn McMullin**

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community. I, in turn, having a youth background, would recruit and find out what youth programs are in the community. I'd tap into that youth program and return the information back to Veronique and see how we could best pick the one that was most appropriate for what we needed to do. We needed to think about things like: are there going to be children in this summer program? Is it close to the area that the Garden Mosaics project is in? All of that is a big help.

As an educator, I was teaching the youth and working with the gardeners. I'll talk about the youth first. I was trying to bring awareness to some city youth about what it is that we expect to come out of a project, because this was all very new to them. The youth are from various communities that have gardens, but a lot of them don't know they have gardens in their communities. There are youth who are in some of the communities who don't have any experience with gardens or open space. I was trying to bring this awareness to them. I'd tell them, "We're going to an open space." I'd ask, "What is open space? Do you know of any in your area? Have you experienced gardening before? Has your mom?" Just to get some awareness of what's going on. "What do you feel about gardening? Have you grown anything? Have you done any science activities with plants or bean sprouting?"

In order to make a program work, you've got to find out where they're at and where they came from in order to know how to get to where they need to go. We assess who knows a little more, who knows a little less or who's already there. It has to be on the youths' level. If many of them didn't know as much pertaining to gardening, you would have to spend more time with them because they're so used to doing educational activities indoors. This is an outdoor project. So we have to start

indoors in order to go outdoors.

I start by breaking the ice, first of all. I'm also a community educator in Nutrition and Health, and I teach youth food-related issues for their health. A lot of the food preparations are basically plant foods that we make recipes for. It was fun doing icebreakers about different foods, talking about the characteristics of foods, playing a game with them about foods, getting them started. We play a game called "Who am I?" I say, "It's green, and people dip it" or "It looks like a tree." They can then start to get this whole process in their head. I integrated the subjects because it helped the educational activities process go smoother.

Garden Mosaics was educational for the youth because it was different than what they're doing in the regular classroom setting. You're outdoors, and the majority of them didn't have outdoor experience with gardening. This is new exposure for them. They're learning about tools, how to plan and design their garden bed, how to plant in their garden plot, what the gardeners are growing. They're looking at the gardeners' work and growing a little something for themselves. The gardeners, in turn, can show them some practices that they're doing for their plants. That's engaging the youth. I can show them safety rules and how to use the tools pertaining to working in the garden. I also made sure they respect each other's space and the gardeners' space, not stepping in any beds. The youth learn about seeds, how to plant and use water holes, watering plants. All of these things were educational for them.

Respect was established in the beginning before we got the youth and the volunteers to come out to the gardens. We knew that learning how to be respectful needed to come before learning gardening practices. You would talk about interviewing — about how we respect each other, about how

people are different, sometimes we eat different things and we have different backgrounds, but we could all be part of sharing and helping each other and learning from each other. Just keeping that awareness going. In the Manhattan garden, we had gardeners from Bangladesh, Puerto Rico, and Alabama. Some of them come from different cultural backgrounds. The gardeners are educators as well as learners, so we are all learning and educating. The children needed to know that.

The gardeners learned that there are Cornell Cooperative Extension staff people who can come out and help them with their community garden. They may not know about us. But I would say "Oh! I live right around the corner!" And then I'd come at another time with volunteers to see how we could share with each other. The gardeners were able to draw on the fact that there is some care and concern for them. And I'd ask, "What plant is this that you're growing in this plot here?" They tell you what the plant is and how they use it. It could be related to us in Spanish or English. So they're educating us because most of the time we have no knowledge about its use until they tell us how it's used. Maybe these are things that we didn't know the practices for, but we found out that this is a plant that they use for salad or a vegetable. And this plant is used for good luck. It could be a spiritual practice or an edible reason why the gardeners use their plants. These were things that we were learning about. We'd ask, "Why do you put this plant leaf behind the ear?" or "Why do you put it on the person's clothes before they leave the house?" And they'd say, "It has good luck for you" or "It will keep the evil away from you."

In a specific plot, there was a plant called papalou. It has a beautiful fragrance; it's edible and they use it in salads. This was something that I was not

familiar with. I never ate the papalou plant; I didn't know what papalou was. But it has a nice small green leaf. I tasted it, and it was edible. That was something I learned about. And the plant kalalou. There was only one kalalou plant that I knew of. I didn't know there were three different spinach plants. I knew of the kalalou plant in the Trinidad and in the Jamaican cultural background. Then I learned that there were two other kinds of kalalou plants. I was really amazed at learning about different plant species, which ones were edible, which ones were spiritual, and where they come from. That opened up and expanded my horizons a little bit more about what's going on in the community garden space. We were learning new and different things about garden plants and how some practices with plants really got started.

Garden Mosaics is a diverse educational project. By that, I mean that it involves youth, community gardeners and the Cornell University faculty and staff. Some faculty and staff came down from the university to help with the interaction with the gardeners and youth. That was the dynamic of the whole Mosaics situation to me: to see the university faculty and staff down here interacting with youth and community people, partnering with us. That's a whole different level of community outreach education that I'm not used to seeing. I hope faculty involvement in urban community educational outreach will be more ongoing. There's something more than just saying "Let's reach out to them in the city from up on the campus because we are needed." If they are tangible at times, then it's visible in your mind. You will know that you're really involved in a program which is a part of a bigger picture. You can now see the whole picture of Cornell University Cooperative Extension-NYC Programs.

It would be very helpful if Cornell University faculty and staff could be more accessible for the people here in the city. I started here sixteen years ago, and it was helpful for me to connect with the Cornell University faculty and staff. I also think that "community educators" are perceived as "aides to deliver a program" at Cornell University itself. That is why after thirty years we are still labelled as "program aides" up on the campus. So I have to stop and think about the people that I have met on the campus in the years that I've been going. It's nice to meet and work with people who have some common goals in life: sharing knowledge with each other. I personally need to know that there's some connection between the university staff and me. I would explain to the people in the community that there are university staff people who study nutrition and health science, environmental educational activities. That's what keeps my momentum going. Can you imagine working for a company that you don't feel the connection to as a person?

It was nice to see that everybody learned something, especially Cornell University faculty and staff up on the campus. I like to see when everyone is learning. It's always perceived that once people get to a certain level of education they know it all. But that's not the reality. People from all walks of life need to understand that people who never receive an education to the level of PhD — or even BA, BS — can still teach someone. There are a lot of people who are beginning to learn how to speak English, how to get started in life. Some people are just learning how to deal with getting in the mainstream of basic skills. But to know that we are all learning and sharing, now that's beautiful. You never stop learning. It's a never-ending thing. There's always something that a person can show you at any level of life. Even a child can

teach an adult. Sometimes we forget, and we don't look at life that way. We have to change our way of how we perceive learning in our life.

Good extension education is everybody working together in a diverse way, in all different levels of knowledge, to share with each other. I like going to Cornell University campus classes to learn subject matter for program delivery. And I like when Cornell staff come down here and see what we are doing here in the city. We can bring them to the field area we're working at. I like to know that when we're standing at this end of extension and say, "I'm from Cornell University Cooperative Extension," people can really feel just that. "That's where I go sometimes to get the information to bring back to you. And yes, we do care about your life." You want the information that you're giving them to be true, and you want it to be something they believe in so they make some behavioral changes for themselves. People know that politicians are not always telling the truth about people's concerns. People get discouraged and feel helpless at times, because they don't believe in each other any more. You want people to believe in some things. You want them to know that there are people who really care about their life.

It was so educational for the gardeners to share information in their community about the Garden Mosaics project and to celebrate what's going on in the other local gardens in the community. They closed the street off and opened the garden for the people to see the work of gardeners and to celebrate. They had people come in the garden and sit and partake of food and show pictures of their different gardening activities. I got involved with that. It was right around the corner from me. I walked around the corner and played games with the children and interacted with the adults. It was beautiful. I took

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pictures and let them know, by bringing my Cornell Cooperative Extension poster banner, that extension is in their neighborhood. And then my face becomes familiar because I live in the neighborhood.

I think that in any neighborhood, it's nice to see people who give you a friendly smile, or people who say "good morning" to you. You get support from people if they know you're willing to come into their community to help them and share. There are a lot of people who never work in their community; they always work outside their community. I was one of them. It was a good feeling to work in my community and to know that I'm from an organization that's about helping people. Now that's a great feeling. I take pride in it. I feel good about that.

In terms of the challenges that we might have come up against, with the Garden Mosaic project, some children didn't remember to have their parents sign the forms that we need signed for field trips. When that happened, you had to leave that child; they couldn't go into the garden. That's very discouraging. Now, when we do programs like this, we can mail forms to the parents instead of giving them to the children. The youth had journals, and they did the best they could with the journals. These children are younger, and they weren't the savviest kids, in terms of articulating their ideas in a journal book. I think they needed more support with writing skills, on how to articulate information on paper. Other challenges: the gardener didn't show up, or we didn't have the key to the garden. I have to take the kids back to the center, when they were looking forward to being outdoors.

The project with the gardeners and the youth program weren't far away from each other. We always looked for a garden within walking distance from a youth program. We have to make sure

that some things are falling in some kind of order so it can go steadily. If gardeners were not in that day, we just turned around and walked our three blocks back to the youth center. Location was important, and so was the support volunteers gave at the youth program. We know good community supports from centers are very important.

At one point, a conflict came up pertaining to the gardeners. There was a gardener in Manhattan who was like a head honcho. Everybody was basically seen like they were submissive unto him, and they were all glad that we were there. We were all sharing with each other. The Bangladeshi gardener was showing Veronique something in the

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lot. They were actually growing something in rubble from a building that was torn down. The president of the garden was saying, "Get out of there now." It was some issue going on that we walked into that day. We are an organization from the outside. We have to look at what's going on within their garden environment, not get into personal issues, and still be within the circle. We respected the head gardener's wishes and came out of that area; he said they were going to be labelled as doing something illegal because there were plants growing in rubble. On the other hand, the Bangladeshi gardener was not familiar with Green Thumb's gardening rules regarding allowable areas for planting. Some gardeners are more familiar with the Green Thumb rules. The Bangladeshi gardeners didn't realize the importance of where food is

grown so that it is safe to eat and not dangerous to your health. Even though they were told not to grow in that area, it looked so rich, so why not grow there? It may not be the safest place to grow, but they had results. They, in turn, wanted us to see their results. It was right outside the garden. And that was the issue. We apologized for going outside the garden. We didn't have to do that, but we wanted to because we didn't want the person to feel uneasy. So what we did was get the other gardener to go back inside with us. They realized that this president of the garden was very uneasy. So they also came back inside the garden. The gardener said, "It's not safe. It's not adequate.

And it's not appropriate to grow stuff there." But like I said, we're talking about different cultural backgrounds and some language barriers, too. This has a lot to do with how we come across to people.

Sometimes the Bangladeshi woman couldn't understand me and I couldn't understand her, but she would point things out to me. I would look surprised so she would know that I'm getting something. Sometimes, body language, expressions, a smile, a gentle look, all of these things, can help. It can help a lot because she sure showed me things that she couldn't tell me. I'd say "Oh! She's growing this, and she's growing this!" But she didn't say "Oh! I'm growing this, and oh! I'm growing that." She would signal me, "Come, come!" and take me by my hand to the plants — cucumber, or yellow squash. When the person is very sincere about something, they give you something. Then you know the caring is there. That has a lot to do with how we interact with people. Before language, people used expression and body signals.

Another barrier is time. Time is

always a barrier! The youth ask you all sorts of questions. You want to get the program delivered, and you've got to do it in a certain period of time. You know that you have to keep up with the time schedule. You try to answer some questions and get back on track with the program.

The other big challenge had to do with having the youth in the after-school program, which was in the fall. We needed to make them aware of what's going on before spring arrives, when the weather breaks and we can be outside with the gardeners. These might not be the same students that you had in the springtime, because in the summer program, students can change. We had to recruit new students again. That means re-interviewing and getting new youth to understand this Garden Mosaics project all over again so that you can get them to point needed in order to work with the gardeners for the summer. Veronique and I worked very well together so we managed to do it in time. Everything went into the report, even the downfalls or the issues that hindered progress, because it is all educational for the next educator. That's a way of being supportive for the next person who may have to deliver the same program.

A key skill of a good extension educator is to believe in oneself as capable of sharing some information and receiving some information. For example, if I have a class of seventeen people, I can stand there with them and say, "I'm giving you this information and asking if there are some things you would like to share with each other." Supporting each other is so important in a group setting. You know you're on the right track when you're constantly educating yourself for program delivery. Before we did the Garden Mosaics project, Veronique and I took some horticultural classes at the 4-H science

conference. Some of this information she knew, some I knew, and some we didn't know. Training provides the foundation for teaching, before we go out and deliver a program.

Being a good extension educator has a lot to do with the person and their self-worth. It tells us how we feel and what we think when we convey something across to someone else. Are they really getting it? Do you feel comfort-

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able or inadequate? Do you feel that the person is getting the concept of what you're talking about? When you see that they understand what you are saying, then you have confidence that you're able to teach what you need to teach. But you always have to take inventory of yourself. Sometimes I ask my audience, "What do you feel we need more support on?" I just can't go by my own judgement all the time; I like to get other people's input. I'm also a people person. I love people and that's a totally different asset. I'm an outdoor person, too; I think that really helps me a lot.

We can not really measure how we all interacted in the Garden Mosaics project. We can't measure how the youth, Cornell faculty and staff, volunteers, and gardeners shared with each other because everyone had something that they brought to the table. Where's the measurement for this? It's not mea-

sured, but it happened. The chemistry was there, and everybody was able to do what they had to do. Everyone was interacting and sharing with each other, but there is no measurement for that. It's chemistry. You put these groups of people together with the young people, and then you get the most beautiful mosaic of people that you'd ever want to see.

Knowing that these people believe enough to be here is chemistry in itself. We have something that's diverse, beautiful and educational. I felt that I was a part of this beautiful people chemistry. It is beautiful being in the garden. Some of the gardeners have language barriers, but it's important to make them feel comfortable enough to know that their ideas are really valued. We're willing to listen.

We're willing to be a part of their world and be there to see what they have been a part of for however long they've been gardening in that garden.

One of my favorite memories was the day that project members all met at the garden. The youth were there and the gardeners were sharing some of their knowledge with them. The project staff were watching and listening. We set up the table with the paper so the gardeners could draw the garden map. I had pencils, crayons and markers. That sparks up things. Everybody's eyes got big; they were excited about drawing. Everybody's talking about the plants and flowers and feeling comfortable. There's a nice cool refreshing drink ready for everyone — the perfect environment to make the day work well.

If I had to sum up what my work was all about in only three words, I would say: "share with people." That's the three words exactly.