Community engagement, education, and resident driven transformation of vacant land are key components to strengthening Pittsburgh’s communities. ReClaim South, a project of Growth Through Energy and Community Health (GTECH), takes a unique approach to community change by working simultaneously at the policy level and through grass roots efforts, building an all-inclusive movement to reduce blight.

In the fall of 2013, GTECH recruited and began to train thirteen residents from South Pittsburgh communities to revitalize vacant lots in their neighborhoods. Throughout the spring and summer of 2014, these residents, called Ambassadors, have worked hard to implement their ideas on vacant lots. Their projects vary widely, representing their diverse interests and hopes for the Hilltop. This program has engaged Hilltop communities in positive change while anchoring them to a network of community organizations. As growing leaders in their neighborhoods on the issues of vacant land management and transition, the thirteen ReClaim South Ambassadors have reclaimed vacant lots in ways that reflect their commitment to their communities.

Growth Through Energy and Community Health (GTECH), is a non-profit organization devoted to cultivating the unrealized potential of people and places to improve the economic, social, and environmental health of our communities.
CARA JETTE - ALLENTOWN

“My neighborhood has been more on a downward trajectory, but recently in the past year there’s been some new life going on there. I’m really excited to watch that unfold and take part in it.”

CHERYL RUFFIN - KNOXVILLE

“I think if we’re going to make some progress and have the city take us seriously, we’re going to have to become the Hilltop. Because then we’re talking 25,000 people strong as opposed to 4000 here, 2000 there. Otherwise they’re not listening.”

CHITRA GURUNG - MT. OLIVER BOROUGH

“I’m excited about the gardening work. I like the environment here.”

DAVE TOTTEN - SOUTH SIDE SLOPES

“Something we really need to think about is: How will we make sure that everybody gets to share in the rewards that are going to come?”

GORDON HODNETT - BELTZHOOVER

“A community is a geographic place that’s defined by the people who live, work, go to school, worship, and play there. Where people are known to each other and define themselves as being from that place. That place defines part of who they are.”

SUZANNE N PHOTOS - MT. OLIVER/ST. CLAIR

“Community means a sense of safety, a sense of liking where you live, a sense of caring about the place that you call home.”
JOHN NIEDERBERGER - MT. OLIVER/ST. CLAIR

“If we are able to take a vacant property and just reinvent it, maybe that can be contagious and get the ball rolling. People will begin to think, ‘What can I do to my house or my yard?’ That’s what I hope - that this thing can just spur some interest and pride of ownership.”

LINDA PISO - KNOXVILLE

“We have a sense that things are going to change. I think people feel that way, but we’ve been let down so long on this side of town that we’re afraid to get enthusiastic. That’s why I have to stay focused. I don’t want to quit.”

MELANIE PFEIFFENBERGER - MT. WASHINGTON

“That smaller neighborhood feel is so bright and so positive, and I know that that’s something that will help to bring us forward.”

MITRA GURUNG - MT. OLIVER BOROUGH

“We want to create a space where parents can let their kids play while they are working in their garden, and also a place where children can learn about gardening and vegetables.”

NATALIE THOMAS - BELTZHOOVER

“I just started watering the garden, and within that garden I found myself. I found peace - inner peace. I found something to share with the children of tomorrow and be effective in my community.”

PATTI STEWART - MT. OLIVER/ST. CLAIR

“We have nothing to draw people here. We have no grocery store, school, our bus route was cut. I think we need something to draw people back into the neighborhood.”
JAMIE BALSER - SOUTH SIDE SLOPES

“The single largest thing you can do is to get people engaged and get them to take ownership and have a vested interest in that particular land. It’s as simple as that. Having people have an ownership stake.”

RECLAIM SOUTH STAFF

EVAINE SING - PROJECT MANAGER
JAMES SNOW - PROJECT COORDINATOR
LYDIA YODER - PROJECT ASSOCIATE
The Arlington Avenue Greenstop in the neighborhood of Allentown is a project that incorporates public art, seating, and planting on what was an overgrown vacant lot. Gabion baskets filled with recycled and found materials will double as an art piece and seating for those waiting at the bus stop or just passing by.

James Snow and volunteers placed reused bricks on the site to line the mulch pathway.

Ambassador Dave placed a Little Free Library at the site.

> ReClaim South project manager, Evaine Sing, enjoying the gabion benches with GTECH CEO, Andrew Butcher, in the background.
The Knoxville Incline Overlook in Allentown is a small park and trail that highlights the historic Knoxville Incline. It will be used as a park and connector between the Hilltop and the South Side Flats. It cleans up a former eyesore and provides the community with a sense of history as well as being a nice place to take a rest or walk through.

< Volunteers from the South Side Slopes Neighborhood Association braved the rain for a work day.

^ Volunteers from CMU prepared the bridge for painting and created pathways on the site.

^ Volunteers first primed the bridge to prepare for painting it yellow.
BELOVED COMMUNITY GARDEN OF HOPE

CHERYL RUFFIN

The Beloved Community Garden of Hope in Knoxville has raised garden beds where food is being grown, a small space for sitting and relaxing, and a Little Free Library for sharing books. The site provides the community with a source of local food and a quiet, peaceful space to spend time.

Sturdy garden beds from Wilderness Lumber Company make gardening at the site more accessible and enjoyable.

Voices Against Violence provided much of the volunteer labor to build the garden.

Painted tires added visual interest to the site and provide a place to sit along with a picnic table and church pews.

These photos show the garden before and after its transformation. The pathway through the garden leads to a seating space with a Little Free Library.
MT. OLIVER COMMUNITY GARDEN
GATHERING SPACE

CHITRA AND MITRA GURUNG

The gathering space at the Mt. Oliver Community Garden has a small area for kids to play and learn. It also has a pergola where gardeners can take a break in the shade and enjoy each other's company. Aside from daily use, this area will be used for events and gatherings in the garden.

Chitra and Mitra wanted to have a place for children to play and relax while their parents gardened.
HILLTOP LITTLE FREE LIBRARIES
DAVE TOTTEN

The Little Free Libraries are at several sites adjacent to Hilltop bus stops, including four ReClaim South project sites. They provide a place for neighbors to share books while promoting reading, transit ridership and a sense of community.

> Dave worked with Ambassador Cheryl Ruffin to install a Little Free Library at her site, the Beloved Community Garden of Hope.

* A neighbor helped Dave install the Little Free Library at the intersection of Josephine and Barry. The library is modeled after red British phone booths.

Dave's Little Free Library at the GTECH Demonstration project site at the Intersection of Arlington, Knox, and Climax in the neighborhood of Allentown.
The Garden On Gearing in Beltzhoover in its first season consists of both raised and in-ground vegetable beds. Fruit trees and bushes on the site will provide natural treats in years ahead. The site is at a prominent location next to both PAT and school bus stops and the Beltzhoover Community Center.

Voices against violence participants volunteered at the garden on a regular basis.

Wooden trellises were built to support raspberries, blackberries, blueberries, and other berry plants.

In addition to raised garden beds, a large garden plot on the site will provide space for growing produce. The side of the Beltzhoover Neighborhood Council building will be the future site of a mural.

Eight fruit trees will be planted at the back of the site in the fall.
St. Joseph’s Garden and Patti’s Point are located in the Mt. Oliver/City neighborhood. Both sites are along both sites are along the main throughway to Mt. Oliver/City neighborhood. Both sites are triangular lots that were once overgrown with weeds. They have been transformed into welcoming gardens that act as gateways to the neighborhood. The sites are beautiful, but are also functional in that they provide food for pollinators and minimize erosion.

John planted some beautiful native wildflowers to attract pollinators to the area.

John started planting on the upper part of his sloped site, but plans to expand down the hill in future years.

Patti used found rocks to create a beautiful and functional edge for her site.

Patti chose perennial plants that would spread over the site over time.
The 30/32 Grape Street Garden in Knoxville doubles as a community space and a food garden. Raised garden beds will be used for gardening education in partnership with the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh - Knoxville. A space with a large chalkboard and seating can be used for community events or just as a quiet space to rest.

> The garden had a great yield in its first season!

> Participants in the Two Wheels Lots of Green bike tour of reclaimed vacant lots had the opportunity to visit the 30/32 Grape Street Community Garden.
The Emerald View Park Trail Entrance off of East Sycamore Street in Mt. Washington was beautified to make the trail more visible and inviting. Brush, invasive plants, and garbage were removed from the site and flower beds were created.

Volunteers cleaned brush out of the site in the early spring.

Volunteers planted perennial plants at the entrances to the trail.
BELTZHOOVER UNIFIED
POSITIVE EFFECT GARDEN

NATALIE THOMAS

The Beltzhoover Unified Positive Effect Garden is a space for neighbors to gather and garden together. The site is comprised of garden beds, a stone path, and a stage for small performances. It is a space for mentoring youth and building up a positive atmosphere in the community.

Many neighbors came out for a volunteer day to plant in the garden beds, build a stage, and add additional elements to the site.

Ms. Natalie turning the soil on her site to prepare for planting

Volunteers built a small stage on the site for puppet shows.

Ms. Natalie uses the garden beds on the site to teach children about gardening.
GAMER STOP AT THE CORNER
SUZANNE PHOTOS

The GameStop on the Corner in St. Clair will be a spot to gather for games of cornhole, chess, or other table games. The space is very visible because it is at an intersection of main roads through the Hilltop and is adjacent to a bus stop.

A little free library on the site will allow those waiting for the bus to grab a book for their transit.

Two chess table sets will be placed on the site along with two cornhole sets.

EDUCATION SESSIONS

Education sessions gave Ambassadors the opportunity to be fully prepared to carry out all aspects of their project, from the technical side of actually building out their ideas on a vacant lot, to getting community involvement and coordinating volunteers. The classes were held every two or three weeks from October 2013 to April 2014.

CLASS TOPICS: Introduction to Program, Site Analysis, Site Design, Design to Paper, Grant Funding, Working with Municipal Partnerships, Site Access, Presentation of Projects, Volunteer Coordination, Land Use Policy
NETWORKING EVENT: MEET GTECH

The first networking event on October 11th, 2013 gave Ambassadors and their families a chance to meet GTECH staff and staff of ReClaim South’s partner organizations like the Hilltop Alliance.

NETWORKING EVENT: SERVICE PROVIDERS

A barbecue was held at the 30/32 Grape Street Community Garden to give Ambassadors the opportunity to talk about the progress of their projects and bounce ideas off one another.

> A highlight of the barbecue was when Linda picked her first cucumber from her garden for everyone to taste.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank The Pittsburgh Foundation, an Anonymous Donor, and The Birmingham Foundation for making the ReClaim South Ambassador program possible.

We appreciate the time and efforts of our partner organizations, including The Hilltop Alliance, Voices Against Violence, and each of the neighborhood groups that supported the Ambassador projects.

We also want to thank the many volunteers that worked hard to clear, plant, and build the Ambassador projects from the ground up.

STATISTICS

NUMBER OF AMBASSADORS: 13

NUMBER OF VACANT LOTS ACTIVATED: 12

HOURS OF TRAINING: 350

NUMBER OF VOLUNTEERS ENGAGED: 230

TOTAL VOLUNTEER HOURS: 800

NETWORKING PARTICIPANTS: 165

AUTOGRAHS

OCTOBER 1, 2014 | 6:30-9PM
RECLAIM SOUTH
GRADUATION
JOIN US IN CELEBRATING THE ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF RECLAIM SOUTH AMBASSADORS
FOOD & DRINK WILL BE SERVED
THE HARDWARE STORE, 744 E WARRINGTON AVENUE