

Marygrove Civic Commons - Climate & Sustainability for our Neighbors

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Marygrove Community Association
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Executive Summary

Over the last year, we teamed up with the Marygrove Community Association (MCA) in Detroit, Michigan. MCA is a nonprofit serving over 700 diverse stakeholders among homes, businesses, houses of worship, and educational institutions in the Fitzgerald/Marygrove neighborhood. MCA seeks to advocate for these stakeholders through outreach, programming, and improvement of community spaces in response to disinvestment and the proliferation of vacant lots and underused public spaces. Most notably, MCA has used neighborhood engagement and feedback to guide and oversee the improvement of community spaces like the Indiana Street Garden, Huntington Community Park, MCA Meadow, MCA Arboretum, and the Green-Arts Alley.

The Graham Scholars contributed to these efforts in four main ways: engaging with the community to gather feedback through canvassing, surveys, and a town hall event, applying for grant funding to support green space development, creating accessible and regular outreach media via the MCA website and social media, and through the development of a sustainability curriculum informed by research on relevant pedagogy.

Our short-term impact is largely defined by the immediate funding received for development of the Green-Arts Alley, increased reach and inclusivity of MCA's digital and in-person communication with neighborhood residents, and by the inclusion of valuable insights gained from community feedback, which will guide future collaboration with MCA. Long term, the sustainability curriculum fosters a culture of environmental awareness, resilience, and stewardship among local youth, and engagement through online media and in-person conversations will lead to a more informed and connected community, which may ultimately foster collective action and mutual aid.

We recommend that future Graham Scholars maintain project alignment with resident interests by uplifting their opinions through regular town halls and detailed feedback surveys; continue to improve and expand on avenues for community outreach, including the accessibility of online resources and bilingual posting; maximize outreach to youth by collaborating with local schools, youth organizations, and the Coalition on Temporary Shelter home; and position Marygrove as a model of neighborhood resilience by continuing to foster collaboration across disciplines (environmental science, design, art, and social engagement).

Introduction and Background

The Marygrove Community Association (MCA) is a vibrant Detroit-based nonprofit organization situated in the heart of the Fitzgerald neighborhood. As a cornerstone of community development, MCA brings together more than 700 diverse households, businesses, houses of worship, and four educational institutions. Upholding the spirit of unity and collective action, MCA is a voluntary neighborhood association committed to driving positive change within its community and shared spaces. Through relentless advocacy, proactive outreach, and innovative programming, MCA works to uplift the lives of residents, enhance the quality of services, and foster a sense of belonging for all stakeholders. The association is organized within the boundaries of W. McNichols, Puritan, Greenlawn, and Wyoming, positioning it within a historic but evolving area of northwest Detroit.

Like many Detroit neighborhoods, Fitzgerald and Marygrove have lived through cycles of school closures, disinvestment, and aging infrastructure. Vacant lots and underused public spaces now populate blocks that once thrived with residents and activity. These changes have social and environmental consequences, and our project was developed in response to the challenges they pose. It is grounded in an interdisciplinary framework that connects ecological restoration, education, and community engagement. We recognized that sustainability solutions in disinvested urban areas must be simple, local, useful, and built on community input and existing assets rather than external, top-down designs. Guided by environmental and social science principles like community organizing, our approach combines ecological learning and community development to reimagine how the Marygrove community can improve.

Specifically, we focused on creating outdoor learning experiences and community outreach programs that connect students and families to the environment through everyday, hands-on interactions. These programs serve as the foundation for broader community-based sustainability initiatives that build resilience, equity, and a stronger sense of place.

Methods

Community Engagement

While each of our deliverables required its own research, community engagement remained at the core of our work, effectively centering the members of the Marygrove Community through community outreach efforts. We built on past Graham Scholars' outreach efforts by canvassing the Marygrove neighborhood and talking to residents, distributing surveys, and cohosting a town hall with MCA at the Live6 Homebase community center. During this event, we asked community members what they wanted to see from their green spaces, how they typically used them, and what they saw as the biggest obstacles facing the utilization and sustainability of Marygrove's green spaces today. This conversation allowed community members to provide us with valuable feedback in an in-person, long-form discussion. We learned that community members used outdoor spaces primarily with their families when going on walks, and that they wanted the Green Arts Alley to reflect their community. Additionally, they were concerned about potential disturbances in the alley once it was cleared. Using this feedback, we identified that large potted planters in the entrances of the Green Arts Alley would separate the space and prevent cars and other vehicles from being able to pass through or park in the alley.

Developing the Green Arts Alley

We then began identifying and applying for grants to help address community members' concerns and realize their goals for the space. To find potential grants, we utilized the GrantStation website and drew on the knowledge of environmental and Michigan-based grants from the Graham Sustainability Institute professional staff and the University of Michigan Ginsberg Center. We found one grant from Huntington Community Bank that fit both the MCA's vision for the project and the grantor's requirements for effective and sustainable community development.

Media Accessibility

To develop a media accessibility plan, our team first went through and compiled a list of potential accessibility issues with both the Marygrove website and Instagram accounts. We then researched foundational digital accessibility practices, drawing on principles from the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.2) and the POUR framework (Perceivable, Operable, Understandable, and Robust), which outline internationally recognized standards for accessible digital design. These guidelines emphasize elements such as readable text hierarchy, alternative text for images, accurate captions, keyboard-only navigation, sufficient color contrast, and clear, plain-language communication. With this research and guidance from partner Jay

Meeks, we systematically worked through the website and improved accessibility. We also developed graphics in both English and Spanish to promote MCA programming on social media in hopes of reaching a broader audience of community members, and created a “Graham Scholars” section on the website to help introduce ourselves and our work to Marygrove residents. Following these edits, we developed an Accessibility and Digital Use Guide for MCA contributors and the new Graham Scholars-Marygrove cohort to develop digital standards.

Sustainability Curriculum

To facilitate a sustainability curriculum for children in the Marygrove community, we conducted a literature review of teaching pedagogy for children in 1st through 3rd grade. We researched environmental curricula and reached out to a past Graham Scholars team that developed a similar curriculum for the Ypsilanti District library. After putting together potential facilitation plans, our curricula were implemented by partner Rachel Cappadona over the summer at the Indiana Street Garden.

Deliverables

Community Engagement

Our deliverables around community engagement included a Town Hall event at Live6 Homebase cohosted with MCA on April 12th, 2025. This event had twenty-five attendees. Additionally, our team created promotional materials to advertise this event, and a feedback survey with ten responses. This feedback ultimately helped inform continued work toward the development of the Green Arts Alley and provides relevant insight into community priorities for the next cohort of Graham Scholars.



This image shows Graham Scholars engaging with residents at the Town Hall event on April 12th, 2025. [Rachel Cappadona]

Developing the Green Arts Alley








Our team completed an application for a grant from the Huntington Community Bank and received \$15,000 in funding to be used in the development of the Green Arts Alley. More specifically, this funding will be used to implement elements researched by the previous Graham Scholars cohort and expanded on by community preferences reflected in the feedback we received through our survey and in discussion at our Town Hall event.

Media Accessibility

Our efforts to increase media accessibility with the Marygrove Community Association resulted in improvements to accessibility for visually-impaired visitors to the MCA website and social media content in both English and Spanish to promote programming. Through the latter, we were able to reach over 1,500 followers across platforms. We also created an Accessibility and Digital Use Guide for continued efforts for accessibility within the MCA, despite changes in leadership and Graham partners in the future.

Sustainability Curriculum

Our team additionally sought to develop curricula for use in facilitating activities for local youth that utilize Marygrove’s green spaces. These curricula highlight the outdoor resources contained within the Marygrove neighborhood, like the Indiana Street Garden, MCA Meadow, and MCA Arboretum, and encourage children to consider how they can observe and interact with nature daily. By creating a sustainability curriculum that prioritizes interaction with Marygrove green spaces, we hoped to inspire ongoing engagement with, consideration for, and investment in preservation of outdoor community spaces among Marygrove youth. More specifically, we aimed to encourage consideration of relationships between plants and animals through observation and creative storytelling. We achieved this through the Pollinator & Wildlife Observation Sheet and the Garden Storytelling activity. These activities encouraged creativity through drawing observations and considering how animals may respond to changes in the ecological community, respectively.

Name: _____		Date: _____	
Location: Indiana Street Garden / Huntington Park			
Section 1: What Did You See?			
 Bees(Honeybee, Bumblebee)	 Butterfly	 Ladybug	 Caterpillar
 Birds	 Potato Bug /RolyPoly	 Squirrel	Other Insects

Above is a sample of the Pollinator & Wildlife Observation Sheet. These activities ultimately help foster mindfulness about natural spaces.

Recommendations

We recommend that the Marygrove Community Association (MCA) continue strengthening community engagement through regular town halls and feedback surveys. Ongoing communication will help ensure that future projects reflect residents’ voices and evolving needs.

For continued work on the Green Arts Alley, we suggest showcasing local art to build community involvement and support. For instance, partnering with local artists and youth programs may further encourage participation and foster a sense of community ownership, which will ultimately translate to supporting the space's celebration and maintenance.

Regarding media accessibility, MCA should continue using and updating the Accessibility and Digital Use Guide we developed. It offers clear guidance on managing content across media platforms and includes resources to support accessibility, such as tools for checking color contrast, adding alt text, and selecting readable fonts. The comprehensive catalog will help new MCA leaders and partners uphold accessibility standards. Regular social media updates and bilingual posts can also strengthen inclusivity and engagement.

For the sustainability curriculum, we recommend collaborating with local schools, youth organizations, and the Coalition on Temporary Shelter (COTS) home to integrate the activities into their programs. Hosting seasonal field trips and workshops can help children stay connected to nature throughout the year, and can help integrate families into the greater Marygrove-Fitzgerald community.

By centering community voices, accessibility, and education, MCA can ensure its projects remain inclusive, engaging, and sustainable for years to come. Continued collaboration across disciplines such as environmental science, design, art, and social engagement will position Marygrove as a living example of neighborhood resilience and innovation.

Impact

Our project has created both immediate and long-lasting outcomes that advance the MCA's sustainability initiatives and deepen community connection. Most immediately, our community engagement efforts, especially the Town Hall event and feedback survey, helped gather valuable insights from residents about how they use and imagine their green spaces. This information directly shaped our team's deliverables and will guide MCA and future Graham Scholars in future planning. The Huntington Community Bank grant we secured will also make an immediate difference by providing funding to begin developing the Green Arts Alley. This new space will reflect community input and create opportunities for social connection and creative expression.

Our media accessibility work has already improved MCA's digital presence. By creating bilingual social media content in English and Spanish, MCA can now reach a broader audience

and ensure all community members feel included. The digital catalog we developed is another major achievement, as it provides thorough and easy-to-follow guidance for managing online content and maintaining accessibility standards. The catalog includes tools to check color contrast, add alt text, and choose readable fonts, making it a sustainable and editable resource for current and future MCA members, the board, and future Graham Scholars who may build on this work.

The sustainability curriculum will also have lasting educational and environmental benefits. In the short term, it offers interactive lessons and field trips, and outdoor activities that teach children about their local environment and how to care for it. Over time, this curriculum can help build a stronger culture of environmental awareness and stewardship within the community as partnerships with local schools and organizations continue to grow.

Ultimately, in the short term, our work has expanded community engagement, improved digital accessibility, provided funding for green space development, and created new educational tools for Marygrove youth. In the long term, our work will help build lasting green space and informational infrastructure that promotes inclusion and access. From media practices to sustainability curriculum materials and foundational insights into community priorities, our work will hopefully empower residents and support MCA's mission of community-driven sustainability for years to come.

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Works Cited

“MCA Home Page.” *MCA Home Page*, 2022, marygroveca.org/about-1. Accessed 21 Oct. 2025.