

Students grow while garden grows



BACKGROUND

This case study explores how TCC dollars have connected students with fresh produce through the Watts Community Tech Garden project (see [page 62](#) for more information about this project). Since this story was written, the Los Angeles Cleantech Incubator became the project lead.

The interview for this case study was conducted in January 2020.

Rudy (second from left), Nicole Landers (second from right), Jose Hernandez (far left), and Estelle Reyes (far right) at a community engagement event at the garden in September 2019. Photo credit: UCLA Luskin Center for Innovation

RUDY is a junior at David Starr Jordan High School. He has lived in Watts his whole life with his parents and younger sister. Of his high school, he says, “All my teachers want the best for me. They pour their heart and soul into everything that they teach, and I’m grateful for that.” When he’s not hanging out with friends, he’s working in the Watts Community Tech Garden.

He first became involved with the garden as a student at Markham Middle School. He took an elective class in sixth grade that taught him and the other students about topics including photosynthesis and plant life cycles. Then in ninth grade, Rudy began volunteering with the garden through a program called College Track, which provides participating students with scholarship money for college expenses. Inspired by his experience in the garden, Rudy is interested in studying fields such as botany, agriculture, and ornithology in college. The scholarship money he earned through work in the garden will help pay for college.

“The garden gives me an opportunity to just breathe in that fresh air and do something, put my hands into the dirt. School is stressful. But every time I go to the garden, it’s like, ‘OK, school aside, let’s focus on the garden.’ And then when I focus on the garden, my stress would go away.”

RUDY

The summer after his sophomore year, Nicole Landers, co-founder and executive director of Community Healing Gardens, hired Rudy as an intern to take on additional duties in the garden. Rudy collaborates with his coworkers on his expanded responsibilities maintaining the garden. “[The experience] taught me leadership skills. I gained ownership and accountability,” Rudy said. He also has a new role model. “Nicole inspires me so much because the garden helps the community by giving them fresh produce and making the kids open up their eyes into, ‘Oh, I can eat this instead of that,’” he added.

A major perk of working in an edible garden is the accessibility of fresh produce. Rudy sometimes brings home some of the fresh produce grown in the garden, where his parents cook with it. Recently, Rudy brought home some squash that his mom added to a chicken vegetable soup. The produce varies seasonally, but Rudy noted that the cucumbers are his favorite. “We did a successful planting of strawberry,” he added, “that was a very good hit with the little kids.”

Rudy will continue to be involved as the garden expands and installs water and energy efficient technologies.

“The garden is just growing and growing. And I’m also growing with the garden. Everyone who associates with the garden is growing with it.”

RUDY