

Residents harvest new skills at community farms



BACKGROUND

This case study explores how TCC-funded farms and gardens provide professional and personal growth opportunities for Watts residents, from students to seniors. It highlights Rudy, a high school student who gained leadership skills, fresh produce, and a sense of calm interning at the Watts Community Tech Garden project, and Reginald Sales, a Watts elder who is adding tools to his toolbox by working at MudTown Farms. See [page 69](#) to learn more about other urban greening projects underway in Watts.

The interviews for this story occurred in January 2020 and September 2023.

Rudy (second from left) and colleagues at a community engagement event at the garden in September 2019.

Photo credit: UCLA Luskin Center for Innovation

RUDY has lived in Watts his whole life with his parents and sister. He is a junior at David Starr Jordan High School: “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,” he said. When he’s not hanging out with friends, he’s working in the Watts Community Tech Garden. The garden was started by the nonprofit Community Healing Gardens, which provides job training and healthy food, and Los Angeles Cleantech Incubator, a public-private partnership geared toward job creation and clean technology acceleration).

He first became involved with the garden as a student at Markham Middle School. He took an elective class in sixth grade that taught topics such as 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 a scholarship that goes into a fund for future college expenses. Inspired by his experience in the garden, Rudy is interested in studying fields such as botany, agriculture, and ornithology in college.

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 welcomed the opportunity to collaborate with his workers and expand his responsibilities main-

taining the garden. “Nicole asked me, ‘Hey, Rudy, would you like to be an intern at the garden?’ And I was ecstatic... I was crying.... Because I’ve been familiar with it for such a long time. Now, I actually got to work there. It was just so cool.”

Rudy’s internship has helped him develop leadership skills, financial literacy, and confidence. As a result, he opened a bank account and started participating more in school.

“Without the garden, my [class] participation points would be very low. But now I’m like either the first or the second or the third to raise my hand. The garden gave me the ability to step up for myself and grow, which I am very grateful for.”

RUDY

“[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, and his parents cook with it. “Both of my parents are disabled. And this internship

has really given me the ability to give back to my parents because [they] have sacrificed so many things for both me and my sister.” Recently, Rudy brought home some squash that his mom added to a chicken vegetable soup. Rudy noted that the cucumbers are his favorite — in fact, he said they helped him shift toward a healthier diet. “[Interning at the garden] gave me access to fresh produce. And then I fell in love with the cucumbers there... instead of munching on the chips, I would munch on the cucumbers.”

REGINALD SIMMS has lived in Watts for nearly 50 years, after moving from Louisiana with his mother at age 10. Now, he works full-time at MudTown Farms, a TCC-funded urban farming and food distribution program, as a maintenance person, groundskeeper, and tour guide. Like the Watts Community Tech Garden, MudTown Farms was started by Watts Labor and Community Action Committee (WLCAC) to provide locally grown produce, job training, and other services to strengthen the community and its food system.

Simms heard about MudTown Farms from Haleemah Henderson (a manager for the project, profiled on [page 56](#)) at WLCAC’s grand opening event for the Jordan Downs Housing Redevelopments (see [page 53](#) to learn more). When Henderson told Simms where the farm was located, he realized it was across the street from a past home of his. “I was like, wow, I want to work there. I grew up in front of there,” he said. He told Henderson as much, and she told him a job might open up soon — so he stayed in contact for eight months. In the ninth month, when he reached out, she called him in for an interview — and shortly thereafter, he had the job he had hoped for.



Reginald Simms (center) at MudTown Farms with coworkers Andre (left) and Jacob (right). Photo credit: UCLA Luskin Center for Innovation

Being involved in the garden has benefited Rudy’s mental health, too. There aren’t many other green spaces in his neighborhood. “The garden gives me an opportunity to just breathe in that fresh air and... 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.”

Simms started at MudTown Farms in March 2020, just as the COVID-19 pandemic was shutting down the country. He worked independently on the farm for the first two years of his tenure, maintaining the facility until the pandemic wound down and staffing levels could be increased. In 2022, he gained two new colleagues, Jacob and Andre, who brought valuable skills and experience in urban farming. Simms relished the chance to learn new skills from them, from preparing land for crops to harvesting the fruit and vegetables grown.

“I’m thankful for the two young men that I work alongside because they are already skilled farmers. For example, I learned how to tell when a watermelon is ripe — it’s ready when the stem is brown or falls off.”

REGINALD SIMMS

The farmers’ expertise has led to a productive farm, and Simms described his satisfaction watching his work lead to growing, healthy produce — and seeing the community reap the benefits. “It’s really fun just watching this stuff grow. When you get to see the fruits of your labor, you know you did something great. When we get the food out to the community, you can see the joy... it’s free, and it’s fresh, and it will stay fresh for a week. Our bell peppers can last in your refrigerator for 30 days because they are so fresh.”

Simms described how MudTown Farms has benefited the community of Watts through the distribution of free, fresh produce. He described the development of the farm as one piece of a broader change that he sees in his community, due to investments throughout the neighborhood as part of Watts Rising. “A lot of people in this community are involved with the work that’s being done with the redevelopment. Change is good when it’s [done by] the people who have been there when there was no change... I just feel really, really great about the future for our young people here...”