

PROFILE

How Covenant House Helped Branden discover his Passion and Purpose

Branden remembers the awe he felt when he first set foot in the Covenant House rooftop garden as a participant in the Cooking for Life (CFL) job readiness program.

“Everything just looked so structured and productive and so pretty at the same time,” he said. “It inspired me.”

Structure, sustainability and the chance to learn more about cooking appealed to Branden, who experienced some difficult moments in his teen years and was seeking a positive trajectory for his life. His first visit to our rooftop garden was also the first time he had a chance to dig his hands into a fully functional garden. He was amazed by the potential of all the fruit, vegetables and herbs he was helping to put in the garden’s raised beds, it lit a spark in him.

“I thought - I want to be able to do that.”

With his first paycheque from a CFL opportunity, Branden bought a small banana pepper plant so he could have the experience of cooking something he grew himself. He learned to nurture the plant and problem-solve his way to a good harvest.

The CFL program, he said, taught him to show up and ask questions, which motivated him to get up every day and attend classes as part of a local urban farming course he was taking, no matter how early. From there, he had the confidence to put his hand up for a plot in their community garden where, since the spring, he has been putting all of his knowledge into practice.

In this garden all his own, Branden is growing tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, spinach, kale, strawberries and cucamelons – a juicy cross between cucumbers and melons he likes to add to salads.

“For me, being in the garden feels like peace and joy,” he said. “I’m just vibing with the plants – picking what I need to pick, watering what I need to water. And I’m feeling productive for the day too.”

Now – and with the encouragement of the circle of farmer friends of all ages he’s made at the local community garden – Branden is preparing to set up a stall at the local farmer’s market. He’s also been asked by the co-op housing management where he lives to lead the



Branden

creation of a community garden on their grounds.

“I could really see myself pursuing this more, going to other co-ops and helping them build their gardens.”

As he goes on to build gardens and cultivate his interest in urban farming, Branden keeps the rooftop garden at Covenant House in mind and tries to visit as often as he can.

He even replicated his favourite part of the garden in his own community plot – a path that cuts through the rows and allows him to admire all his hard work.

Looking back, Branden thinks his teen self would’ve never envisioned his future as an urban farmer. But now he gets to be that role model for the kids in his neighbourhood who often come around while he’s gardening to pepper him with questions.

“It just puts a smile on my face,” he said. “When I was growing up, I didn’t have anything like that.”

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