

GUMBO

TEEN MAGAZINE

ON THE BLOCK

by Shawn Henry

Two years ago, as my English teacher read the book *Seedfolks* aloud to my class, an idea began to sprout in my mind. The book, written by Paul Fleischman, is about a young girl who plants lima beans in an abandoned lot. At first, everyone thinks she is crazy, but as the tiny plants start pushing through the soil the neighbors start watching them grow. Soon, the community is working together to turn the lots into a garden for all to enjoy.

My mind had turned to the rat-infested, trash-filled vacant park in my neighborhood of East Flatbrush that was a popular hangout for gangs. "Why not?" I thought to myself, "Why can't I do that?" That's when the Garden Angels was born.

I started searching the web for organizations that helped young people interested in helping their communities. By then I had a group of friends from the neighborhood who wanted to help, but we needed financing. We found Youth Venture, an organization that helps teen leaders better their communities. I proposed my idea to clean up the vacant park to Youth Venture, and we were selected for a grant.

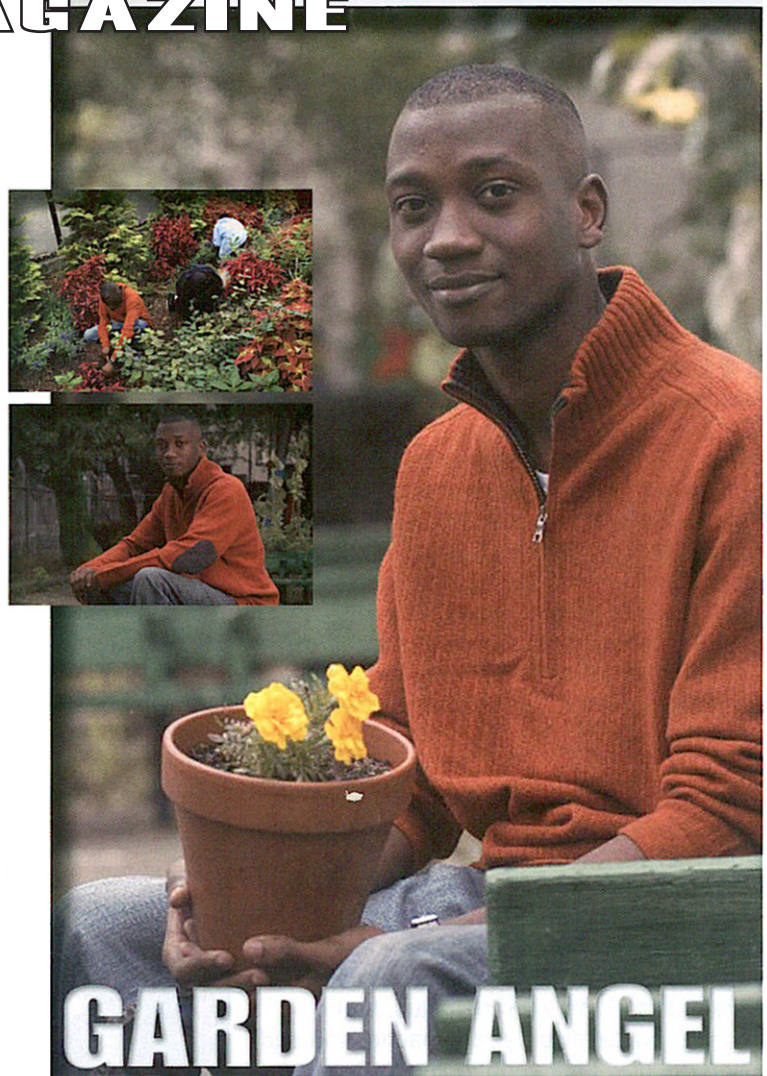
The next step was to find out who owned the park. The paper trail pointed to the city, but no one wanted to lay claim to the vacant park. A year later, I got tired of red tape and bureaucracy, so the Garden Angels took matters into our own hands. We told the city that we were going to maintain the park.

The first weekend we had slated to clean up the park was stormy and I doubted anyone would come out to help. I called everyone to postpone the project, but, to my surprise, no one wanted to cancel. They convinced me to keep going. It was pouring rain and lightning, but we were all there in rain coats and holding umbrellas. We worked all summer.

Today, the park is a community garden. The Garden Angels regularly stop by to weed and clean the park, which is now a great spot for community events. Someone always comes over to us, shakes our hands and tells us what a great job we're doing. They're always shocked that it is young people -- not the city -- who did this. Many new members join after seeing what we're doing for the neighborhood.

Now the Garden Angels do much more than care for the community garden. Teens in my neighborhood don't always have a safe place to go after school or on weekends, so we've also taken over at a local library. The Garden Angels now have a chess club and many other after school programs. We have also started our own community multicultural day and regularly commit to community service projects.

Most of the Garden Angels are in junior high school which is a great age at which to reach young people. They're not yet affected by the bureaucracy and craziness of the world. At that young age they still know that they can create the world they



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want to live in. I am always inspired by these young people.

One day, I want to build a community center where my neighbors, young and old, can gather. It's really important because there young people often have nothing else; there really isn't anywhere safe to go other than the library. These kids can make a difference. There is so much we can do to make this world a safer, healthier, cleaner and more fun place to be.

I created Garden Angels, which transformed an eye sore into a place of pride, but the greater change happened within these young people. They refused to fill their lives with the ugliness and violence of gangs and crime. Like seeds growing just beneath the soil, there is internal change going on in their minds and hearts. Soon, they will push through the ground with beauty and strength.

That is my inspiration.

Photos provided by The Garden Angels