

The Marka Experiment Decision Time

WORDS Charli Wyatt

It's been almost a year since Charli Wyatt started working with the residents of a low-income neighborhood in Marka to create a community garden. After a long, sometimes disheartening, ride, a chance meeting in Atlanta convinces Charli that it's time for some big decisions to be made.

"So tell me about the garden project," Lynn says.

This is my first time meeting Lynn. She is a friend of Habitat Jordan, and Philip suggested that I meet her for coffee while I am in Atlanta visiting my family for the holidays. I can tell she's genuinely interested. I decide to jump right to the point.

"Well, actually, I'm not sure what to do next..."

I tell her about the last meeting that I had with my women gardeners, just before leaving for home. I had seen the eagerness in their eyes and was looking forward to getting down to action. Now that we don't have to worry about looming planting dates – the next best time to plant is in March – we can take it easy and tackle that pile of dirt at a more measured pace. An hour here, an hour there, no need to break backs. And when Salwa had visited the site a few days before, she had told us that our "compost," having had two months to decompose on-site, was ready to use and would work just fine.

But at that meeting, when I asked the women how they

wanted to proceed, I encountered the same reluctance. It's too much. It's too cold. The men can't help. The children aren't interested.

Thinking that perhaps they just needed a little help breaking up the work into less intimidating chunks, I suggested that while I was away they could finish moving the first pile of dirt, the one we'd already made a big dent in back in October. They said they'd try, but the look on their faces was familiar – don't make

"It's time to get more hands-on. Let's build this garden, and let the community join us in whatever way they are able"

us do this. I told them that I was sorry that I couldn't be there to help them with it. "So are we," said Um Abdullah. "You give us energy."

As soon as I finish telling the story, Lynn jumps into brainstorming mode. I didn't intend to put a challenge in front of her, but she's full of ideas. She's turning her own experience inside out to help me figure out the next step to take with my gardeners. As I listen to what she's saying, I realize that, in focusing so hard on making this a participant-driven project, we haven't fully appreciated the importance of our role in providing vision and presenting choices.

Lynn offers an example from her involvement in child development projects in Atlanta that strikes me as the perfect metaphor for the situation at hand.

"When parents are teaching a child about making choices," Lynn says, "They won't say *What do you want for lunch tomorrow?* That would set them up for trouble – what if the child asks for lasagna and the parents don't have lasagna? Instead, they offer a choice. They say, 'Do you want a grilled cheese sandwich or a peanut butter sandwich?'"

Lynn's words remind me that the process is ongoing – we continue to seek the way forward, adjusting our expectations and assumptions as we learn. Eventually, this community will be able to create its own projects and tell us what support is needed. But we're not there yet – in unfamiliar situations, we build up our ability to take responsibility gradually through experience, and those who guide us do so by giving us choices according to what we can manage at the moment.

So what choices can we manage now? Where are these women in their lives? Why are they here? What do they want? What can they do?

I think of Um Abdullah. She's always seemed to me to be the most excited, the most involved. I have to confess that I gravitate toward her – her sweet smile and modesty softens my heart. She was our ambassador in many of the homes we visited in April. She is the youngest. She is the one most capable of hope.

When we first met her, she told us that she had tried to grow beans, tomatoes, peppers, carrots and cucumbers at home, but she didn't have enough water and everything had died, despite the help of

garden-savvy relatives from her husband's family. She was very eager when we talked about using techniques to harvest and conserve water. She spoke movingly about wanting to learn something that she could teach her children, and she often brings her daughters with her to meetings. She married at 15, and now has eight children. Just after we started building the beds in the fall, she learned she was pregnant with her ninth child. She's still eager, but she is exhausted.

Um Marwan also has eight children. I have never met her husband. Um Khalil's husband is gone, and as far as I know she only has her son, Khaled, in her life now.

How do we bring these women – these three very unique individuals – into the project in a meaningful way? Let's face it – having them shovel 50 cubic meters of dirt is not the answer.

Could we break the garden beds up into smaller plots, and invite more families to participate? Do we put the community garden idea aside for the moment and give soil and compost away to families who come to gardening workshops? Do we start them off with a seedling in a pot?

How do we bring these women into the project in a meaningful way? Let's face it – having them shovel 50 cubic meters of dirt is not the answer

"You know, Charli, I'm starting to realize that we can't be as invisible in this process as we used to think," says Philip, musing on my account of my meeting with Lynn. "It's time to get more hands-on. Let's build this garden, and let the community join us in whatever way they are able."

Sounds good to me. And why limit our definition of community, here? There are as many ways to help as there are hands. I have friends who love to dig in the dirt almost as much as I do. I'm asking them to join us, and bring a shovel. And I have friends who like to play with kids and sing songs and read aloud and drink tea and chat with people. I'm asking them to join us, too, because what they can bring is just as important. Everyone participating in whatever way they are able. That's what this community garden is all about. **JO**