

# Local Youth Recognized for Social Justice Work

By Vania Galicia

The GROW Windham crew and Windham Youth CORE just returned from the Everyday Democracy National Convening in Baltimore MD. The greatest thing we realized is that we have an important story to tell, and many others have their own important stories to tell as well. With that we came to the conclusion that it is our stories that connect us and strengthen our community.

I have been a member of the Windham Youth CORE since 2015. The Windham Youth CORE is the high school youth program of GROW Windham, a program of the Windham Regional Community Council that works to promote access to healthy food in Windham. The Youth CORE is the "engine" of GROW Windham. We grow food for the community, which we sell at the Willimantic Farmers Market and make into our own brand of Sofrito. We teach younger kids and community members about gardening and nutrition. And we support local food security through projects like raising funds to match SNAP purchases at the Farmers Market.

This past year I and another Windham Youth CORE member, Sasha Rojas-Hernandez, entered a young leaders competition held by Everyday Democracy. Everyday Democracy is a national program that promotes social change by bringing together diverse people and supporting communities to work together. Their goal with this competition was to find young leaders around the country who are doing positive work in their community. We were one of five finalists, who were invited to their National Convening in Baltimore this December 8-11, 2016. We ended up winning second place, and received a grant of \$1,500 in order to further our work. We were presented with a plaque and recognized for doing many things in our community in front of all who attended the convening. At the ceremony, Shaquayah McKenzie, Community Outreach Specialist from Everyday Democracy, said: "The Windham Youth CORE has made a specific impact on their community by increasing food access through community engagement, education, and specific programs like garden training, and increasing access to SNAP benefits. Youth learn skills, and teach others, while engaging

different parts of the community. Thank you for continuing to expand your reach and your impact to different parts of your community, and allowing your community to determine the direction of your programming."

Although being recognized for our work was without a doubt one of the highlights of the convening, it was definitely not the biggest. At the convening there were many conversations going on about all sorts of topics such as,

immigration rights, Native American struggles, youth empowerment, politics, and the large focus of this year's convening, racial equity.

Throughout our three days in Baltimore, I heard many important stories which I will forever remember. I heard stories of pain, joy, fear, anger, frustration and many other emotions caused by all sorts of problems.

Although we all had different motives that brought us to the convening, we all shared one common goal, to reach justice. Justice for our native American brothers and sisters. Justice for our immigrant community. Justice for all people of color. Justice for the poor. Justice for the youth. Justice for all.

Although this convening was only three days, I gained many different perspectives that I may have not been able to see in a lifetime. This is what storytelling can do. But not simply hearing a story or an opinion will do the trick. In order for all communities to move forward we must listen.

We must listen to everyone's stories from our community, because our stories are what make us stronger. 2016 has been quite the year. There are divides everywhere. But no matter where you stand I encourage you take a moment to just listen, because at the end of the day if we don't listen, then we will make no progress.

Thank you for listening to our story. I hope you will join us, for a garden workday, or a community event, so that we can learn yours. Please find us at [www.GROWWindham.org](http://www.GROWWindham.org)

"The biggest communication problem is we do not listen to understand. We listen to reply."

-- Stephen R. Covey



Members of the GROW Windham crew and Windham Youth CORE are recognized for their work recently in Baltimore, MD. Contributed photo.