

GOOD WORKS

→ BY CELIA SHATZMAN

CAUSE → AMERICA'S GROW A ROW

COLLEEN DUERR, 42

Hometown → Pittstown, NJ

Family → Husband Jens; daughter

Hannah, 14; and son Erik, 11

“The Empress of Eggplant” is how people know Colleen Duerr. But that’s not the only veggie in her life. As vice president of America’s Grow a Row (AGAR), Colleen also plants squash, potatoes, broccoli, corn, cabbage and more, which she harvests and donates to food banks, pantries, crisis centers and other places of need throughout New Jersey. Since AGAR’s founding in 2002 by Chip Paillex, it has given away over 1 million pounds of food, and 1,100 volunteers have contributed about 4,000 hours of their time.

“Feeding people is very powerful,” Colleen says. “We all share canned goods and mac & cheese—and we have to keep doing that—but the opportunity to supply fresh produce is particularly cool.” Chip, Colleen’s friend, encouraged her to join AGAR in 2007, and she became vice president in 2009. Her duties have included volunteer management; overseeing the website, database and newsletters; and giving presentations and providing education outreach on hunger and poverty.

Local farms let AGAR use parcels of their land to raise crops, and volunteers plant seeds. Every week a different group—such as scout troops, schools, youth programs and families—water, weed and pick vegetables. In addition, partner farms and ShopRite grocery stores give AGAR their excess produce.

The organization relies on private and corporate donors, and grants for funding. It has recently purchased its own piece of farmland and is planning to build a poverty education center, where it can teach kids about hunger and host a free farmers’ market. The ultimate goal is to expand AGAR nationwide.

A personal perk for Colleen is that she can spend time on the farm and still be with her family. “I like that I can include my children because it’s tough to find volunteer opportunities alongside your kids,” she says. “It’s a great lesson for them to do really hard work and then give the fruits of it away.” ●

Visit Americasgrowarow.org to learn more, sign up to volunteer or make a donation.

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