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Tar Heel of the Week: Volunteer doctor gives doses of free vegetables

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Tar Heel of the Week Robert Majors, 78, of Raleigh, has been a long-time volunteer with Urban Ministries and has been overseeing their garden near their Capital Blvd. location for 2 years.

COREY LOWENSTEIN — clowenst@newsobserver.com [Buy Photo](#)

By Marti Maguire — [Correspondent](#)

RALEIGH — Dr. Robert Majors has seen a lot of overweight and diabetic patients in more than a decade as a volunteer doctor in the free clinic at Urban Ministries.

A little more than a year ago, he spied something nearby that he thought could chip away at these problems – a sun-filled swath of grass across the parking lot from the nonprofit's offices on Capital Boulevard.

So Majors, a retired physician, got permission to use the lot for a vegetable garden. He then recruited a group of retirees that has fought off heat, weeds, and even groundhogs to harvest a ton of fresh vegetables from the 50-by-55-foot plot.

The cucumbers, squash, eggplant, beans, okra and tomatoes all go to needy families, along with the cans and boxes of food that the organization's food pantry provides to many of the same people whom Majors has treated at the clinic.

"We thought it was important to have a source of good produce for the food pantry folks," says Majors, 77. "Having seen, as we do every day in the clinic, the weight challenges and diabetes, we thought we could make a difference."

The garden may not be a permanent fixture; the lot where it sits is for sale. But Majors hopes the efforts will help a few people eat healthier, and maybe inspire some to grow their own fresh vegetables. Plans are in the works to help some pantry recipients start their own gardens at home.

Peter Morris, who recently took over as director of Urban Ministries, has known Majors for decades. He says the garden is just one more contribution Majors has made to the health of his community after years of freely offering his medical expertise to Wake County's poorest residents.

"He is concerned about the quality of food we consume, knowing that inadequate nutrition is a leading cause of heart disease and diabetes," Morris says. "His real hope, though, is to help people grow their own food, to appreciate the land, and to improve their nutrition through their own efforts in their own backyard."

Volunteering all over

Majors grew up in Charlotte, or what he calls in his characteristic deadpan, "the state of Mecklenburg." In a nod to local animosity toward the state's largest city, he follows that proclamation with, "Have you heard of it?"

He went to Davidson College but went further afield to medical school, to George Washington University in Washington, D.C. His studies were interrupted by the Navy, which assigned him to a transport ship and naval hospitals in Virginia and Maryland.

He returned to North Carolina after graduation, where he helped found an ear, nose and throat practice in Raleigh that in the early 1970s was one of few such specialty practices in Raleigh.

The scarcity of his specialty meant that he and his partners were also called upon to treat patients across the county with ailments from allergy issues to throat cancer – and to train other doctors in their methods.

A pediatrician, Morris trained under Majors in ear, nose and throat issues, and he says the pioneering practice was vital in helping all kinds of patients, regardless of whether they had insurance.

Majors stayed at what became Raleigh-Capitol ENT for 41 years. When he retired a few years ago, he had already been volunteering regularly at Urban Ministries' Open Door Clinic, where low-income residents get free medical care, for about 10 years.

His early experience doing general medicine comes in handy at the clinic, Majors says. He's the regular doctor for patients with chronic conditions, particularly those related to ear, nose and throat problems, but also some who suffer from diabetes, heart disease and obesity.

Though he has little experience with farming, Majors has long enjoyed outdoor pursuits, an affinity that

shows in his other volunteer work. He has worked as a volunteer doctor at Falling Creek Camp, a Christian boys' camp in the Western North Carolina town of Tuxedo, for many years, and he has served as a physician on Sierra Club service trips.

For him, the garden is a logical extension of both his love of the outdoors and his commitment to keeping his patients healthy.

Trouble with groundhogs

While Majors may have conceived of the idea for the garden, he credits his three partners' help with making it happen.

A retired veteran service officer who grew up on a farm serves as the supervisor. All four retirees, including another volunteer doctor, have put in hard, hot hours planting, harvesting, and tending to the plants.

The group researched which vegetables people would find the easiest to prepare, and which varieties would produce the most food with the least effort.

"The idea is to have a garden that's very productive and provides fresh food that people can utilize easily," he says.

Because the site is not permanent, they didn't invest much: a few poles set in concrete to hold up beans, some fertilizer, and lots of manpower.

Last year, the quartet hauled 5-gallon jugs across the parking lot to water the garden; this year, Majors persuaded the car dealership next door to run a hose from its building across a creek to the garden, though they haven't had to use this awkward system much because of the wet weather.

"It's an event when we use water," Majors says.

Some of their early crops were pilfered by a group of groundhogs living in a nearby railroad embankment. The group trapped and moved the marauders.

They track their contributions in a detailed log at the food pantry. Last year, they brought in about 2,000 pounds. Just last week, they added another 100 pounds to the tally.

The pantry also gets fresh vegetables from a smaller garden on site, from the InterFaith Food Shuttle and from other contributors. But it's hard to keep enough in stock. On a recent afternoon, the shelves of the pantry were lined with cans and baked goods, but workers there said they were all out of produce.

More than 30 families a day leave Urban Ministries with a week's worth of food, and these recipients have been thrilled to see more green in their boxes, says Josephine Charles, the food pantry manager.

"They all appreciate all the fresh vegetables we've been getting," Charles says. "It's great to have our own farm in our backyard."

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