

Urban farmers find that success can lead to eviction

By **SCOTT MCFETRIDGE**
Associated Press

OMAHA, Neb. — After four years of growing and selling produce in the heart of Omaha, Ali Clark has become expert at yanking out her black raspberry bushes and replanting them at another site.

It's a prickly chore Clark loathes but one she can't avoid as her Big Muddy Farm has had to move from one vacant lot to another even though the business was thriving.

Urban farms like Clark's are being evicted from center cities across the nation where they've become a much-remarked-on driver of urban revival in recent years, having brought healthy food, commerce and eye-pleasing greenery to dreary neighborhoods. During the recession, downtown landowners and leaders offered up plots for free to get new vitality on empty streets.

Now the thriving farms are being routed by another urban phenomenon: the hordes of people moving back downtown to live, which is turning green spaces into prime real estate. Plots where low-income residents raised vegetables, where community groups trained at-risk youth and where small garden businesses took root are being snapped up for construction of new apartments and townhouses.

"You have to plant as if you're going to be there 10 years, even if you know it probably won't work that way," said Clark, a co-founder of Big Muddy Farm. She added, "It stinks to put in the time in an investment that doesn't last."

Sad but inevitable

The evictions are sad but inevitable, said Amy Brendmoen, a City Council member in St. Paul, Minnesota, which recently booted an urban farm from city land to make way for housing construction. Even the most robust farms can't earn enough to compete with a real estate development.

"You couldn't help but smile when you went by," she said of the ousted Stones Throw farm. "They were working so hard. You could see the harvest. It was incredible."

No estimates exist on the number of urban farms, but their popularity soared in the past seven or eight years. Many started as community projects.

It's unclear how many will survive. Big Muddy's partners are hoping to hold onto their main farm, a series of raised beds and unheated greenhouses on three empty lots between a nonprofit theater and houses dating to the early 1900s.

But in Denver, Lisa Rogers last month closed her Feed Denver organization, which promoted urban farming in the booming city. The fact that the farms' beautifying effect actually helps endanger them is a bitter pill to swallow.

"Developers will call and say, 'We have a piece of land, can you pretty it up for two years?'" Rogers said. "As available land gets squeezed and prices go through the roof, like in Denver, it's nearly impossible to find land and stay there."

Public property

Even public property isn't safe. Recently, a 6,000-square-foot nonprofit farm called GreenLeaf was evicted by the Denver Housing Authority so the land could be sold to a private housing developer. At-risk high school students worked at the farm, which is now moving next to a middle school.

"We're going to have to look for new customers, and our old ones are going to have to look for a new produce source," said Cody Meinhardt, the nonprofit group's executive director.

In many center cities, residents are lamenting the disappearance of the farms, or their move to the suburbs.

Laura Staugaitis regularly bought produce-filled boxes from a local farmer near Den-



Nati Harnik/AP Photo

Ali Clark displays a Mexican sour gherkin at Big Muddy Farms, an urban farm in northern Omaha, Neb. Urban farms and community gardens have been a celebrated trend for years, but as more people look to live and work in central cities, growers says it's harder to find and remain on land now sought by developers.

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co-founder of Big Muddy Farm



Nati Harnik/AP Photo

Big Muddy Farms, an urban farm in northern Omaha, Neb., is seen amongst residential homes.

ver, but said she can't justify the 45-minute trip the purchase now requires.

"The drive made it a negative experience rather than an enriching experience," she said.

The pressure for urban land is especially intense in the fastest growing cities like Houston.

In 2008, neighbors in a financially and racially mixed area just southwest of downtown signed a \$1 a year lease

with a property owner to turn an overgrown lot into the Midtown Community Garden.

"My goal was to get people out of their homes and apartments so they could relate to each other, and we did that," said resident Scott Harbers, who helped set it up.

But attempts to get local government to acquire the site as a public space failed, and last year it was sold for nearly \$1 million to a housing developer.

Some urban farm promoters are pushing local officials to begin setting aside plots for urban agriculture because of the health and community benefits. In the Seattle area, officials have designated portions of parks and other public land. In Los Angeles, community groups are work-

ing to encourage developers to have farming and green space designed into housing projects, including on rooftops.

"The vacant lot story is cool, but it's also short term," said Jesse Dubois, a leader in the Los Angeles urban farming effort.

Youngest US chess master has to work on his endgame

By **STEPHEN SINGER**
Associated Press

GREENWICH, Conn. — At age 10, Maximilian Lu is the youngest-ever chess master in the U.S. Even so, he sees room for improvement.

The distinction of being a national master belongs to less than 2 percent of U.S. Chess Federation members and is earned by racking up at least 2,200 points in competitions. It's a rarity among children, but Lu shrugs it off, saying he needs to work on his endgame.

"It's all right. I have to improve other stuff," he said in a recent interview.

Max, who plays 45 minutes to an hour a day, and an hour or two on weekends or before major tournaments, started playing chess in an after-school program when

he was 6 and has competed in tournaments in Toronto, South Africa and Dubai, and he represented the United States in Greece this month.

Climbing the ranks has been difficult, he said. In matches with increasingly tough competition, ambitious rivals are always "coming up behind you," he said.

Max became the youngest-ever chess master in September, at 9 years, 11 months and 2 days, according to the U.S. Chess Federation. He toppled the record attained in 2013 by Awonder Liang of Madison, Wisconsin, who became the youngest master at 9 years, 11 months and 15 days.

Young chess players now are stronger than in the past, due partly to online chess games that allow players to practice alone and to efforts by schools, clubs and others



Julie Jacobson/AP Photo

Maximilian Lu handles pieces of a chess set during an interview in Armonk, N.Y. The 10-year-old recently became the youngest chess master ever in the United States.

to draw more players, said Jean Hoffman, executive director of the U.S. Chess Federation.

For Max's parents, supporting their son's interest is

not much different from what soccer moms and dads do, traveling from one competition to the next.

"We didn't plan anything out," said his father, David

Lu. "It just sort of happened."

An adult's perspective also makes a difference. Lu said he helps his son handle what he calls the "psychological aspects" of chess, or maintaining a balance "between seeming mentally tough between losing a game and coming back to play another game."

If approached the wrong way, competitive chess can be a "high-pressure thing," David Lu said.

Ian Harris, manager of the Chess Club of Fairfield County in Norwalk, and Bryan Quick, executive director of the Marshall Chess Club in New York — sites frequented by Lu — say the game has exploded in popularity in the past decade, particularly among youngsters.

In addition to ubiquitous after-school chess programs,

charter schools are taking up chess in the classroom. Educators say the game teaches logic and critical and analytical thinking skills and the ability to lose gracefully.

"If kids stick to it long enough, their concentration is improved," said Ronelle Swagerty, head of school at the New Beginnings Family Academy, a Bridgeport charter school that offers chess classes to seventh- and eighth-grade students.

David Lu said he's not sure Max is looking to make a career in chess.

"As long as it's fun, we'll encourage it," he said. "The higher and higher you go it's very difficult and if you don't enjoy it, it's not really worth it, I think."

For Max, the attraction to chess is simple: "I just want to do it for fun, as a hobby."



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