

Carlos Gomez

Gardener Extraordinaire

The police took away his shirt, which had three bullet holes. So says Carlos Gomez who survived a shooting outside of his public high school in Los Angeles. He quickly found himself expelled and had to scramble to find another school. Now a senior at Central High School, he's seen too much of his neighborhood devastated by gang violence, too much prejudice based simply on someone's neighborhood, too much abandoned property, too much discouragement.

But Carlos has chosen not to be discouraged, not to give in to the negatives that surround him. And one way he's thriving is by gardening—an unusual activity in his neighborhood. With AFSC's help, students from Central High, volunteers, and mentors took over a blighted, unused area near the school. The participants transplant seedlings and diligently water and weed the plots where they grow tomatoes, beans, radishes, cucumbers, and other vegetables.

In addition to a budding horticulturist, Carlos is an artist who has creative plans for improving the garden layout, “decorating” it so that it becomes a welcoming space for people in his community. One day during his recent spring break, despite feeling under the weather, Carlos joined AFSC staff Anthony Marsh to go door-to-door to offer free vegetable seedlings. After assurances that they were not selling anything or asking anything of the occupants, they found ready acceptance of their gifts.

The seedling distribution was a prelude to community meetings for public housing residents. Los Angeles restricts them from having gardens or even planting flowers to enhance their surroundings. AFSC and Carlos want to change that restriction, which they believe is unjust. And the door-to-door visits are just one element to build momentum for that change.

In addition to his involvement with AFSC, Carlos is a volunteer sound engi-



Young volunteers carefully tend the vegetable plots at the Central High School garden in Mar Vista, CA.



Carlos Gomez (in striped shirt) gives a tour of the Central High School garden to visiting students. He's one of the main volunteers who has learned to start seedlings, transplant them to the raised beds, and to water and weed as needed.

neer at a music studio. He plays guitar and piano, has begun to learn violin via lessons on YouTube, and takes African drumming classes. And, of course, he keeps up with his studies at Central High School where his favorite subject is history.

This multi-talented teen, whose single mother has six other children, has long-range goals. His first priority is to go to college. He wants to pursue his creative interests along with academic subjects.

But his ultimate prize would be to start his own non-profit organization that combines a creative arts school with gardens. Carlos finds beauty in both.

Of his experience with AFSC, Carlos says, “It’s been life-changing for me in such a positive way. I am more aware of the world around me, of what I don’t like about it, and what I can do to change it. I know in my heart that one person can make a difference and improve life. That’s what I want to do with mine!”