

## LoCaL FoOd

## Sola Gratia Farm Grows Good in CU

by Fiona Munro

*Fiona Munro is the Outreach and Education Coordinator for Sola Gratia Farm. You can reach her at [SolaGratiaOutreach@gmail.com](mailto:SolaGratiaOutreach@gmail.com)*

Here in Central Illinois, we're surrounded by prime farmland—miles and miles of crops, primarily corn and soy, growing on some of the most fertile soil in the world. And yet, approximately one in seven adults and one in five children in our community does not know where their next meal is going to come from. This disparity is what the founders of Sola Gratia Farm—visionary members of St. Matthew Lutheran Church and Faith in Place—were responding to when they created this farm in 2012.

Sola Gratia means “by grace alone.” We are a small nonprofit farm founded with the overall goal of building a regional food system where high-quality, locally grown produce is available to everyone, especially those at an economic disadvantage. A big part of our mission is our donation work: we are committed to share at least 10 percent of our produce with regional hunger-abatement organizations. We work with partners like the Eastern Illinois Foodbank, Jubilee Cafe, Daily Bread Soup Kitchen, Little Free Market, Mobile Market, and others to make our produce available to folks in need in our community. We also usually surpass our donation goals, as we've donated between 20–30 percent of what we produce each year over the past several years.

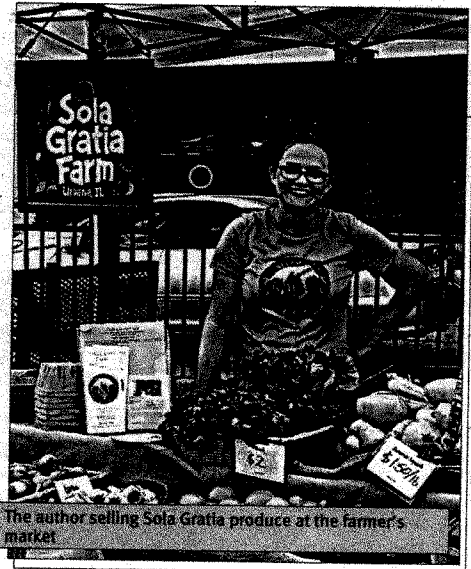
When we first broke ground at Sola Gratia Farm, we were a very small organization. We farmed four acres, generously made available to us by St. Matthew Lutheran Church, with one farmer, one farmhand, some basic equipment, and a lot of volunteer help. From the beginning, our farm has been supported in large part by our CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) program, through which community members who believe in our mission can purchase a “share” in the farm in the winter and receive a box of seasonal vegetables every week throughout the growing season. In our first year, we served 80 CSA members while donating a little over 5,000 pounds of produce to the Eastern Illinois Foodbank.

Since then, we've striven every year to accomplish more towards our mission of reducing hunger—and that doesn't just mean donating vegetables. In order

to make Champaign-Urbana a place where no one goes hungry, we need to address the reasons that healthy food is often not accessible to people with low incomes. In most cases, it's a combination of factors, including that it's too expensive, sold too far away, or requires too much prep time. For families with children, the barrier is even higher, as many children are hesitant to eat vegetables, and it's not worthwhile to spend limited funds on something that some members of the household might not eat. To truly respond to these factors, we need to go further than just donating food, so we've developed

partnerships with many different community organizations that work directly with those in need to understand how we can be more fundamentally supportive. One such partnership with Champaign-Urbana Public Health District has allowed us to help create a Farm to School program in Urbana schools, so that children from pre-K through high school could have opportunities to learn how to grow and prepare healthy food and build lifelong skills. Another partnership, with Cunningham Township Supervisor's Office, Urbana Park District, and Channing Murray Foundation, supported the collaborative creation of Solidarity Gardens, a community gardening project to support home and community gardens alike in growing more food for food-insecure folks in our community. We also partner with organizations all across the community to host farm tours, cooking classes, and other events to build community around good, healthy, accessible food.

In order to do the work we do, we also need to be good stewards of the land. We utilize organic and regenerative practices on all our land because we know that if we don't, we will eventually run out



The author selling Sola Gratia produce at the farmer's market

of capacity; high-quality produce for our neighbors; cover crops, a sustainable practice that enriches the soil for future generations. We've made progress since our first year—now farmland has 20 acres annually, around 100 pounds of produce per acre. Ever-growing, ever-allying. In fact, we strain the land so we can expand current land and expand into new crop

nutrients; use more long-term sustainable practices to have more capacity to use our farm space. This hasn't been an option until now—we've been renting our land, so we can't own it at any time—and, indeed, five acres currently farm have been sold to the city to build a fire station. But exciting! The process of purchasing 29 acres near Urbana to develop into a permanent, community farm! (If you'd like to support our mission, we are raising funds to be able to start a vision a reality next year—check out [gratiacsa.com](http://gratiacsa.com)!)

According to the most recent nursing home data in the US, Champaign County is one of the premier sources of food insecurity data in the US, Champaign County to suffer from a 10.5 percent food insecurity rate. We've made progress since 2012, but thousands of families in our community are still suffering from hunger—and the COVID-19 pandemic has made their struggles worse. We are continuing to do this work until there are no more going hungry in our community.