



Margaret Morgan

Family recipients of Mountain Roots' fresh food delivery program.

## Getting to the 'root' of it

### Mountain Roots photo exhibit tells food stories from across valley

As Mountain Roots responded to increased food needs during the pandemic, the organization developed personal connections with people across the valley: meeting people at their front doors during supper deliveries, in their backyards, in community gardens and at weekly free produce markets. This community outreach led to a photo exhibit "Photovoice: Food stories from across the Gunnison Valley" to be displayed at the Gunnison Arts Center (GAC) starting next week.

To learn more about the nutrition, health habits, food sources and challenges households faced prior to and during the pandemic, staff members asked people to share their stories. As a result, many gaps and inequities in the food system were exposed.

Typically, Mountain Roots aims to empower people to increase self-sufficiency and to eat healthier on their own. This is done through nutrition lessons, cooking classes, community gardens and farming. But this year was different.

As more and more people experienced negative impacts from COVID-19, the need for nutritious food increased steadily over the summer, whether it was due to extended unemployment, illness, specific vulnerabilities or other challenges.

"We believe in everyone having access to healthy food, regardless of their economic situation. It's a basic human right," said Kaelyn Schultz, the food security coordinator for Mountain Roots.

The pandemic has opened



Mountain Roots has collected more than 1,000 pounds of produce from backyard gardeners so far this season.

a window of opportunity to allow community members to speak more openly about some of these issues, since nearly everyone is experiencing some kind of struggle right now, she said.

Mountain Roots learned that everyone in our community has a different perspective, unique habits surrounding food and an interesting story to tell.

Some valley residents aren't able to properly feed themselves. Others must choose between paying the bills and feeding their families, or between paying off student loans and eating well.

Other families with health conditions have been strictly quarantined, so Mountain Roots and Living Journeys teamed up to deliver fresh produce to cancer patients. The delivery drivers often find handwritten notes or catch a smile through a window. One interviewee said, "You can't buy what you want. It's as if we're stuck in a jail cell, we can't leave."

"We heard so many insightful and sometimes heart-wrenching experiences during personal interviews this summer, and we were called to action," explained Executive Director Holly Conn. "People

**What:** Mountain Roots "Photovoice: Food Stories from Across the Gunnison Valley" exhibit  
**Where:** Gunnison Arts Center  
**When:** Oct. 19-Nov. 22, ArtWalk reception Nov. 6, 5-8 p.m.  
**More info:** mountainroots-foodproject.org

showed so much courage in speaking up. We wanted to amplify their voices. Everyone needs to know more about what our neighbors' new reality is. It is time to take a closer look at the state of food insecurity and inequity in our valley."

Paired with portraits by Margaret Morgan, these stories are brought to life in the exhibit, which will be on display throughout the fall.

A full gallery display is scheduled to appear at the GAC from Oct. 20-Nov. 30 with a First Fridays ArtWalk reception Nov. 6 from 5-8 p.m. The exhibit will be in the Crested Butte Center for the Arts throughout December. More information is available at mountainrootsfoodproject.org.

*(This piece was contributed to the Times from Mountain Roots Food Project.)*



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