The Cincinnati Zoo has been in Avondale since 1875 and is working tirelessly to strengthen our relationship with the neighborhood. Recently, a fourth pillar of our Mission Statement was added – “Serving Community”, which recognizes our responsibility to partner with diverse and economically challenged communities in our daily work. This addition mirrors the transformation the Zoo has been experiencing as we use our resources to improve our community. In doing so, we have had to examine our own mindset and make changes that echo our community engagement and support our mission. Food is the connection that ties us all together. We have been using that connection to promote sustainability, show how zoos can be involved, and help improve fresh food access, all while strengthening our relationship to the community.

A mile from the Zoo is Gabriel’s Place, a food ministry with a mission to provide access, education, and nutrition to a neighborhood without a single full service grocery store. The Zoo has supported Gabriel’s Place from the beginning, building their first hoop house, supporting their community garden and market, and brainstorming ways to engage youth with programs that promote sustainability, healthy living, service learning, and more. One goal is to use local food to connect urban youth and suburban youth, using Gabriel’s Place, the Zoo, and our zoo farm as our classrooms.

Located 26 miles north of Avondale on 650 acres of land is the Zoo’s farm called EcOhio. Some farmable, some forested, all belonging to the Zoo for furthering its mission. In 2012, 24 acres were reclaimed as a wetland with species returning to this habitat that haven’t been seen in Warren County for years. Green BEAN Delivery leases 100 acres of land to grow crops for their business, the Zoo, and Gabriel’s Place. They practice sustainable farming and will be a certified organic farm. EcOhio has endless possibilities that connect our mission of sustainability and our dedication for available local food. The Green BEAN partnership not only decreases our ecological footprint, but builds a sustainable local food system for the community. This new and sustainable ecosystem will provide multiple facets of agriculture and serve as an educational platform for community members to enjoy for many generations.

As food from our farm comes back to the Zoo, it helps tighten our food security and close the loop on our food cycle. The Zoo’s animals and guests consume food grown on the farm. Waste from those animals and guests is composted and brought back to the farm. Food on the farm is grown in nutrient rich soil, provided by the composted waste continuing the cycle. We are doing everything we can to tell the story, show how it is done, and practice what we preach.

Back in Avondale, the Zoo showcases vegetable container gardens, raised beds, living walls, greenhouses, and even an aquaponics system. These educational pieces make it more apparent how committed we are to local food. Much of the food grown in these spaces is harvested by our chefs to use in our kitchens or is taken straight to our animal exhibits and fed as enrichment. Our main restaurant, Base Camp Café, has been certified as the greenest restaurant in the United States.

This is just the beginning. We’ll continue to grow these partnerships, increase food production, stay committed to sustainability, enhance education and service learning opportunities, and bring an oasis of fresh produce to a food desert.