



## GREENHOUSE TO CAFETERIA – RICHLAND PARISH'S HYDROPONIC GROWING PROGRAM

On any given day, you will likely find Rory Gresham working away in one of the five hydroponic greenhouses at Richland Parish School District. Rory is the Greenhouse Manager for Richland Parish, growing lettuce, mustard greens, kale, tomatoes, cucumbers, bell peppers, and more for the school's meal programs. What started as an idea from Gracie Hosea, School Food Service Supervisor, grew into a self-sufficient hydroponic farm serving Richland Parish students and the community year-round. The idea was seeded at a conference where Ms. Hosea heard school districts sharing how they source fresh fruits and vegetables from local farmers. Ms. Hosea wanted her students to experience locally farmed crisp, tender lettuces and juicy tomatoes for their salads and sandwiches. Still, she couldn't find a local grower able to provide the year-round product that her programs demanded. Hydroponic growing was the solution, and colleague Beverly Gresham, Field Manager, knew the person for the job, her newly retired husband, Rory.

Rory's retirement quickly turned into a full-time, paid position at Richland Parish, transforming their five traditional greenhouses into hydroponic growing centers. The greenhouses on the school's property were built by the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry but had since been abandoned. With permission and a Farm to School Seed Change grant, Richland Parish renovated the empty greenhouses; however, the grant did not cover hydroponic growing. So, Richland used its own funding to transform the newly renovated greenhouses into high-tech, lively hydroponic growing centers. That was eight years ago, and now Ms. Hosea skillfully incorporates Rory's product in all of their school lunches and summer meals. Not only is the product available year-round, but Ms. Hosea doesn't have to worry about the cost of tomatoes doubling or lettuces going bad shortly after shipment. They don't have to worry about romaine recalls or chemical and pesticide exposure. Rory's lettuce stays fresh six to eight weeks after it's picked, and students can enjoy the burst of flavorful cherry tomatoes year-round.

**“Everybody loves my cherry tomatoes.”**

**– Rory Gresham, Greenhouse Manager, Richland Parish Public Schools**



Most importantly, students and families love the hydroponically grown produce. By serving quality, fresh food, Ms. Hosea has seen an increase in participation and satisfaction in school meals - especially with their salads! The kids' favorite item is Rory's cherry tomatoes. With a big grin, Rory shared that "everybody loves my cherry tomatoes." Soon, Rory hopes to add hydroponic strawberries and blueberries to the greenhouses.

Richland Parish is located in rural northeast Louisiana. Some families have to travel for miles to reach a full-service grocery store. The school meal programs ensure that every student has daily access to fresh vegetables that they may not have access to otherwise – even through summer when school is not in session. Ms. Hosea incorporates Rory's produce in their summer meals program, serving Richland Parish students and any child in the community 18 or younger. Restaurants have approached Rory and Ms. Hosea to sell their product outside of school meals, but students are their number one customers. However, whenever the greenhouses have a surplus of product, Richland Parish shares it with older adults in the community and sells it to the public.



*Richland Parish is located in northeast Louisiana. Richland Parish Public Schools serves rural communities in the Rayville area.*



***Want to learn more about the School Nutrition Programs? Check out [bestpractices.nokidhungry.org](https://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org) to learn more. Don't forget to share this resource with a friend or coworker!***

Neighboring parishes have taken note. Rory has shared learnings on hydroponic growing with multiple communities and school districts across Louisiana. Rory also works with students interested in hydroponic growing, teaching and mentoring them so that they can take growing skills with them after graduation. One student that Rory mentored started a hydroponic garden at his university. Ms. Hosea and Rory hope to partner with the Richland Parish high school science department to incorporate the growing program into the curriculum. They would also like to start a skills-based apprenticeship program so that students can jump-start their careers.



With rising food costs and droughts threatening the food supply, Rory sees hydroponic growing as the future for school meals and community food access. Sustainably sourced, nutrient-dense, and flavor-packed, Rory's produce nurtures not just students, but the families and communities of Richland Parish. It's an investment in both time and resources, but Richland Parish is committed to their hydroponic growing program because they know it's also an investment in the nutrition security of their students – creating an equitable and sustainable environment for all.



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