
CONFERRAL OF THE HONORARY DEGREE

DOCTOR OF HUMANITIES, honoris causa

Kay Bolden

Kay Bolden is the recently retired CEO and “Accidental Farmer” of the Warren-Sharpe Community Center, a multi-faceted, non-profit, community-based organization offering numerous social service programs and vital support to families living primarily on the southside of Joliet, Illinois

. Kathleen Bolden, Warren-Sharpe grew tremendously under MsBolden’s responsive leadership, “developing a holistic and inclusive approach to solving neighborhood problems” and growing a comprehensive community resource for low-income families throughout Will County, offering afterschool programs; a summer day camp; PACT, or Police and Children Together—a summer mentoring program in partnership with the Forest Park Community Center and the Joliet Police Department; food relief and urban farming; parenting forums; community service opportunities; and boys and girls mentoring and leadership programs

Knowing that the majority of the Center’s families live in food-insecure households, MsBolden worked especially on providing both emergency food relief and increased food security for hundreds of community families, through several food and farming programs: the Center’s food pantry, which provides for hundreds of families each week; Kids in the Kitchen— featuring planting, harvesting, and cooking classes; and Green Sprout Urban Farm, a youth-run urban farm initiative that provides organic vegetables and herbs for the Center’s children and their families, and teaches community members how to grow and cook their own food. As MsBolden notes, despite the challenges of “contaminated soil, poor water quality, lack of infrastructure, lack of green space,” and other diminished conditions characteristic of low-income areas, after its first year, “Green Sprout Urban Farm...produced enough food to feed every single child in summer day camp, every single day, with surplus food for the food pantry”

Warren-Sharpe’s extraordinary urban gardening efforts were recognized multiple times by then First-Lady Michelle Obama: In 2015, organization members and families were invited to tour the White House Kitchen Garden; in 2016, Warren-Sharpe became the first federally-recognized urban farm in Will County; and in 2017, Green Sprout Urban Farm was selected as an Obama Legacy Site by the Obama Legacy Initiative

Born in Urbana, Illinois, MsBolden was raised in Joliet, attended St Francis Academy (now merged with Joliet Catholic High School) and received her Bachelor’s degree in English from Governors State University. She began her career in social services with the Joliet-Will County Community Action Agency and later managed programs within the State of California’s Human Services Department