

# Growing a Greener Future

UrbanPonics tackles food waste and fosters community in Bucks County.



PHOTO BY LAURA PEDRICK

*UrbanPonics founder Webb Stone (front, center) and board member Merrill Pierce (back) welcome George School's Applied Technology and Botany class to get an education about the full spectrum of aquaponic and hydroponic growing systems during a recent visit.*

BY ANDY HOLTZMAN

**A** Bucks County-based nonprofit, UrbanPonics, is on a mission to revolutionize the local food system by bringing sustainable, year-round agriculture indoors. Founded by CEO Webb Stone in late 2021, the organization is utilizing cutting-edge soilless farming techniques to combat food waste, create local jobs, and provide fresh, healthy food to the community.

Stone, a Doylestown resident with over 30 years of experience in developing technological solutions, was inspired to found UrbanPonics by a passion for a more sustainable food system.

His drive to create UrbanPonics is deeply connected to his own life experiences. Growing up, Stone witnessed his single mother's struggles to make ends meet, which instilled in him a profound empathy for those facing financial instability. The memory of living his younger life "on the edge" is a driving force behind Stone's mission to forge sustainable local economies for future generations.

His vision also was shaped by firsthand observations of poverty and a staggering amount of food waste across the country. UrbanPonics' mission directly addresses the significant problem of a food supply chain that loses over 40% of its produce to spoilage during transport.

The organization utilizes vertical farming, a method that grows plants in stacked layers to maximize space. This approach is powered by two soilless techniques: hydroponics, where plants grow in a nutrient-rich water solution using up to 90% less water than traditional farming; and aquaponics, a symbiotic system that combines hydroponics with raising fish. The fish waste naturally fertilizes the plants, which in turn purify the water for the fish. This indoor, controlled environment allows UrbanPonics to grow produce without pesticides or chemical fertilizers, ensuring insect-free, healthier food year-round.

UrbanPonics operates out of two key locations, each serving a unique purpose.



PHOTO BY LAURA PEDRICK

*UrbanPonics board member Barbara Stange places lettuce into a small aquaponic unit at the UPstairs farm in Warminster.*

The Middletown Grange in Wrightstown serves as a public platform for outreach and education. UrbanPonics uses this location to engage with the community and showcase its innovative systems at events like the annual Grange Fair.

Meanwhile, the UPstairs Farm in Warminster is the organization's operational and demonstrative site, housed in a 7,200-square-foot former trucking call center. This facility is where UrbanPonics' innovative growing systems are in action and where a prototype for a scalable model is being developed. "Out of those five vertical wall systems alone," Stone points out, "we'll be able to grow 7,000 heads of lettuce a year with no soil and very little water."

Fueled by grants, community donations, and partnerships, its model is designed for scalability, with Stone noting that smaller, 4,000-square-foot units can employ several people and still be profitable.

But UrbanPonics' mission extends beyond growing food; it's about growing people.

The organization provides career opportunities and hands-on training for community members, including a dedicated program at the UPstairs Farm facility for adults with special needs. Stone believes this work addresses a critical societal need, providing purpose and community for individuals who have aged out of the school

system. Thirty years ago, he was volunteering at a school for students with autism to help raise money for its technology needs.

"Since then, I have met so many friends with children on the spectrum that I wanted to find a way to help support these parents with better options for their children to flourish in life."

For Stone, a father and grandfather, this mission is deeply personal. "My family is one of the driving reasons why I wanted to do something about our neighborhood's quality of life. And yes, I am a crusader for a better future for our society. We have an abundance like we have never seen before – and yet we have record homelessness, medical distress and abject poverty all around us."

In addition to its work with adults, UrbanPonics has partnered with local schools, like Bucks County Technical High School, to offer hands-on, on-site experience in these innovative farming methods. Stone hopes to begin providing nutritious school lunches grown by these student farmers in the future.

The organization also works to bring the farm to the classroom, as highlighted by a new program with Palisades High School. In this project, students will grow trout from fertilized eggs. The project will teach students about both food production and the local ecosystem, as the trout will eventually be released into Pennsylvania's streams.

The CEO's end goal is to partner with building owners to set up similar distributed farms, particularly in more urban neighborhoods. This strategy bypasses the financial and logistical challenges of large-scale industrial farming by focusing on local needs and creating jobs within communities.

Inspired by urban planner Daniel Burnham's philosophy to "Make no small plans," Stone has adopted this for his UrbanPonics adventure. He acknowledges the formidable challenges in his longer-term vision — to expand into major cities to tackle "food deserts" and create meaningful, sustainable local food economies — but he remains committed.

Says a confident Stone, "The only way to eat an elephant is one bite at a time." □



PHOTO COURTESY OF URBANPONICS

*UrbanPonics board members get ready to greet visitors at the 2025 Middletown Grange Fair. From left are: UP founder Webb Stone, board member Bill Scheffler, board member Laura Pedrick (front), advisor Eileen Sinett, and board members Merrill Pierce and Barbara Stange.*