Erika Allen is an inspiration to the national sustainable community. Growing up with a father who was groundbreaking in the urban agriculture realm, Erika spent much of her life working on all aspects of the farm. With this background, she was eventually, after her studies, brought back to her roots to begin a lifetime working to bring a sustainable and social service based agriculture system to the city of Chicago. Through Growing Power Chicago, Allen became a beacon of hope for the Chicago community and has allowed for both a sustainable and social change to commence.

Upon Wild Roots Garden’s founding, the principles of serving the evolving educational and social needs of the Northwestern community by inspiring students to think critically about the food we eat and by starting conversations about sustainability, social justice, and our food system. Considering this ideology, introducing Mrs. Allen to the Northwestern community seemed a perfect fit.

Recognizing what Allen had to contribute, her conversation and presentation resonated in several ways allowing both the Wild Roots group and the Northwestern community to be educated. First and foremost, she allowed the audience to understand the significant connection between growing food, growing minds and growing communities. Using gardens and farming education as a tool, Allen and Growing Power hoped to ensure that people of all economic circumstances should have access to fresh, healthy food. Although when
generally the term “all economic circumstances” will be indicative of those with less money – Allen expressed that this truly meant all people. Across college campuses nationwide, students are unaware of the healthy and sustainable food options available to them. By having Wild Roots, she encouraged, we as the student representatives must exposé how sustainability in the food industry can and should touch persons of all types. This, just as Growing Power preaches, will grow the minds and communities to be aware of the importance of food justice and environmental sustainability.

After educating the community on how their involvement and awareness was important, Allen addressed the education of the garden itself – how we can grow. To her and her organization it all comes down to the soil. This highly technical and straight forward piece of advice was not entirely surprising to most, yet as she spoke, it became apparent how much more emphasis needed to be placed. Over Wild Roots’ exposure to composting and soil prominence in our work, Allen taught the audience that when you have truly spectacular soil, you could make truly spectacular product. She taught with proper ratios and knowledge of what goes into your compost, you can produce far more than the general public and at a higher quality.

This piece of advice undoubtedly will change the foundations of the Wild Roots garden. With an increased focus on our soil this upcoming season, we will hope to not only improve our soil but as well educate the campus on the importance of composting. We hope with the newfound knowledge – and additionally Allen’s educational aid this spring – we will both improve our
production and growing rates as well as bring this knowledge to students, groups and facilities across campus (and the Evanston community) who are attempting to accomplish the same goal.

With the generous grant from ISEN, bringing Erika Allen to the Northwestern community truly allowed Wild Roots to prosper in more way than one. Our knowledge base was enriched, our drive for success was improved, and our involved community grew.