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Seniors reap benefits of autumn plantings

Written by
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In September 2014, The Adult Day Center of Somerset County in Bridgewater planted a seed in the form of a Horticultural Therapy (HT) program, thanks to a grant from the Grotta Fund for Senior Care of the Jewish Community Foundation Metro West NJ.

Twenty-two bimonthly, one-hour workshops called Horticultural Connections since last September have produced a bountiful harvest for the ADC members, students and staff from the New Road School, and ADC staff and volunteers. The ADC of Somerset County is a nonprofit agency committed to providing high-quality, affordable day services to disabled and elderly residents of Somerset County.

The goals of the HT program, created and facilitated by me, with assistance from ADC Nikki Hoffman, activities assistant, was to provide activities that inspire and motivate members, provide physical benefits from gardening and working with plants materials, allowing members to use their fine and gross motor skills when planting seeds or assembling different projects, provide stress relief from feelings of anger or aggression, and provide social benefits.

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- New Road School provides student volunteers to assist with the workshops
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“Bringing horticulture therapy to the ADC has been a great addition to our program,” said Diann Robinson, executive director. “When participating in the horticulture sessions, our members are engaged on many levels — their senses are stimulated, they reminisce, they work together and produce beautiful results.”



Horticultural Therapist Laura DePrado of Final Touch Plantscaping LLC working side by side with Robert Spiwak planting seeds of marigolds. (Photo: Courtesy of Laura DePrado)

As part of the program New Road School also is providing student volunteers to assist with the workshops and help members to complete tasks. The school, which offers three day schools throughout New Jersey, provides special-educational services for children and youth who experience learning, language and social difficulties.

“Our goal is to offer our students a variety of work experiences to assist them in making choices for their future,” New Road School Career Counselor Frank Schneider said about the program and collaboration. “Because of your program, our students are now beginning to have job opportunities at local Shop Rites in their florists.”

New Road School Job Coach Carole Rynn added, “I enjoy working with the members and the students doing the fun and creative activities.”

All of the sessions have allowed the members and students to connect and inspire success on some level, and working together on seasonally related individual take-home projects, while socially engaging, teaching and learning along the way.

“This program has rekindled my childhood memories of my father’s garden, making me want to garden again. When I bring home a finished project from Horticulture, it not only benefits me but also cheers up my wife and caregiver,” said Greg, an ADC member.

The program’s overall successes in the seasons of autumn, winter, spring and early summer, and the one-hour sessions have progressed from individual activities to include team and group whereby up to 15 participants of various abilities garden at the waist high planting table. The table was redesigned from a standard one used for horticultural therapy programs around the country that only accommodates up to six participants.

Rynn described the outcomes for the New Road School student volunteers during one of the team activities.

“Rena, Sam and Devin today were planting kitchen gardens with herbs and petunias,” Ryan said. “Rena was helping with the soil and charcoal. Rena was helpful to Laura and the members. She takes direction and is able to follow through. She seems to like participating in HT. Sam and Devin were helping with the planting, and keeping the soil tins filled. Devin also labeled the plant markers for one table’s planters. Devin helped the members plant the flowers as well as handing out the shovels. He worked with several members at the raised planter table. He said he enjoyed the HT program. Sam was engaged with whatever task he was involved in. He had a smile on his face and was helping the members. He takes direction well and did what was asked of him. Sam was able to identify and help those who needed assistance.”

I am grateful to the Grotta Fund for making possible the opportunity to implement a horticultural therapy program with an amazing team that has reached the goals we established at the onset. The participants and the program have grown, and we were honored to have the New Jersey Secretary of Agriculture Douglas Fisher, along with State Sen. Christopher “Kip” Bateman, and Assemblywoman Donna Simon, the New Jersey Nursery and Landscape Association participate in some of our sessions in November and December. The Somerset County Freeholders joined us during Horticultural Therapy Week the third week of March.

On May 11, Gov. Chris Christie signed into law Senate and Assembly Joint Resolutions, sponsored by Bateman and Simon, designating the third week of March as Horticultural Therapy Week beginning in 2016. New Jersey is the first state in the nation to do this in order to raise awareness about horticultural therapy.

“The horticultural therapy program at the ADC is inspiring and connecting people at all ages and stages,” Simon said. “Programs like this will help New Jersey build awareness and highlight the many benefits of this successful therapy which helps countless individuals in rehabilitative, vocational and community settings.”

This month, the program under the grant will conclude with a celebration, a garden party for all of the participants and community partners. Additionally, Middle Earth will be joining the festivities. Middle Earth is a nonprofit that has served youth in Somerset County for more than 40 years. Earlier this month, the ADC and I started working with participants from the Visions program, an employee-readiness program.

To learn more about the Adult Day Center’s horticultural therapy program, or become a volunteer or donor, contact Hilary Kruchowy at hkruchowy@adultdaycenter.org or 908-725-0068.

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