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Planting Seeds of Life: Oldwick resident given citation for doing plant therapy

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After her daughter died, 89-year-old Lorraine Galbraith of Oldwick, was left alone.

Gradually, her life, and her connections to others, grew smaller. She put herself in a wheelchair and lived in social isolation and in poor health. Over the years, she soldiered through Hurricane Sandy and numerous medical issues, including a stroke, by herself.

She was “not very engaging,” said her legal guardian and caretaker, attorney Frank Whittlesey.

With no family to care for her as her health waned, Whittlesey searched for a way to get her “stimulated” and more involved in society, with everything from arts and crafts to musical activities.

Eventually, Right at Home Care, Galbraith’s caregivers, suggested horticultural therapy, which uses gardening and planting related activities to help better the lives of patients. Whittlesey contacted Laura DePrado, president of Final Touch Landscaping and a registered horticultural therapist with the American Horticultural Therapy Association (AHTA), to work with Galbraith.

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Lorraine Galbraith of Oldwick has completed 300 sessions of horticultural therapy
- Leonard Lance flew a flag over the White House to honor Galbraith’s dedication, which he gave to her
- Galbraith received a citation, a proclamation from legislators supporting the therapy
- Horticultural therapy is growing in New Jersey

For more than 1,600 hours and 300 sessions, Galbraith worked with DePrado, each session with a different set of goals and activities for Galbraith to do.

Those goals are tailored to the specific needs of the patient. For Galbraith those included finding stimulation, tapping creative expression, being more engaging, finding new ways to interact and socialize, finding ways to feel empowered and allowing her to wilfully participate in the activities.

Activities included drying flowers and responding to blooms, colors and fragrances, in addition to caring for the plants.

Over the past two-and-a-half years, Galbraith's life has blossomed. She cultivated a little indoor garden that became home to a palette of different plants such as flowering and non-flowering houseplants, herbs, vegetables and annuals.

On Aug. 12, Representative Leonard Lance (R-District 7) met with Galbraith to congratulate her on her engaging new life. During a small event hosted down the street from her home at Melick's Town Farm, Lance gifted her with an American flag and told her that an American flag will be flown over the capital in her honor later this year. (The Melicks are neighbors to Gailbraith and have one of their orchards in her backyard.)

She also received a State and General Assembly citation for her "dedication, determination, commitment, success and support for horticultural therapy," as well as a proclamation from the Hunterdon County Board of Chosen Freeholders, represented at the event by Freeholder Director John King.

"Today gave me a rare but lasting impression of human spirit and compassion. Lorraine thrives because of horticultural therapy with Laura," King said.

State Sen. Michael Doherty and Assemblymen John DiMaio and Erik Peterson, Republicans representing the 23rd District, also were there to present the citation.

Many of the legislators in attendance have been raising awareness for horticultural therapy.

DiMaio and Peterson sponsored a bipartisan bill coined by Senators Christopher Bateman (R-Dist. 16) and Joseph Vitale (D-District 19) that called for the celebration of a "Horticultural Therapy Week" on the third week of each March starting next year. The bill was signed into law this May.

DePrado, who organized last Wednesday's event, called it "a celebration of [Lorraine's] will to live."

"It couldn't be more appropriate and beautiful to hold this event," added DePrado, who studied horticultural therapy at the Rutgers School of Environmental and Biological Sciences.

Why it works

According to Professor Joel Flagler, who teaches horticultural studies at Rutgers University, the therapy works because everyone can relate to plants in one way or another — we eat them, build with them and wear them on a daily basis.

The plants don't discriminate, according to Flagler, [so patients can build their sense of self-worth without fear of being judged for their disabilities.](#)

[Plants are also inherently calming and peaceful to patients, who can find a "special place" away from the stress of the human world when tending to them.](#)

"Working with plants helps to create a non-threatening and low stress experience," Flagler said.

Flagler added that "it's a very good time for horticultural therapy" in the Garden State. The program began at Rutgers in 1996, and its classes, once sparsely populated by students, are now constantly full. The amount of grants the program receives has also increased.

"It's grown in popularity because it seems to resonate with the undergraduate population who are very interested in using nature as part of the healing process," he said.

Rutgers is just one of several schools offering a degree program in horticultural therapy. Others include Kansas State University, Temple University and Colorado State University.

Legislators are also taking a keen interest, due in part to a push from DePrado, who invited the legislators to meet Galbraith, and was one of the guiding forces behind the successful push for the bipartisan "Horticultural Therapy Week" bill.

There are currently 25 registered horticultural therapists in New Jersey that develop vocational, social and therapeutic programs for people living with a broad range of problems.

Those problems include substance abuse issues, psychiatric challenges, physical injury or developmental or psychiatric disability. There are also programs for incarcerated individuals, people with socioeconomic difficulties, the elderly and the general community.

Galbraith is a testament to what those programs can accomplish, and plans to continue to work with DePrado indefinitely.

The Monday before the event, the two made a sun tea of chocolate mint sprigs, which they gave to the legislators who came to honor Galbraith.

Whittlesey is very happy with Lorraine's "remarkable transformation"

The plants have "given her a new purpose in life," he said.



*Lorraine Galbraith makes sun tea during a therapy session.
(Photo courtesy of Laura DePrado)*

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