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RVCC breaks ground on enabling garden



BRANCBURG When doctors first diagnosed Laura DePrado with a brain tumor, she felt as if she had been set free. Then studying horticultural therapy at Rutgers University, DePrado said that it was only when

she received the diagnosis that she truly felt motivated to celebrate and raise awareness about what she calls "the people-plant connection."

Years later, DePrado, now a horticultural therapy practitioner and a Rotary District 7510 coordinator, helped break ground Thursday on an Enabling Garden at Raritan Valley Community College's campus in the North Branch section of the township, an initiative brought about through partnerships with RVCC, Rutgers University and Eagle Scout Patrick O'Rourke of Pittstown.

The concept behind Enabling Gardens is simple: to provide a 100 percent accessible garden for therapeutic enjoyment by people with disabilities. Designed to span 5,000 square feet across the RVCC Conference Center, the garden will contain a motley assortment of plants, ranging from Sweet William, Creeping Phlox, Swamp Milkweed, Black-eyed Susan, Blue Waxweed, Spearmint and Oregano to Wild Geranium and Foxglove Beard-Tongue. The plants were chosen specifically for the sensory benefits they could provide to visitors by the way they feel, smell, look or even taste, according to Brian O'Rourke, RVCC's executive director of facilities & grounds and father of Eagle Scout Patrick O'Rourke.

"The garden is at the front of the school and is very visible. It will get a lot of traction because people don't have to look for it," O'Rourke said.

For Patrick O'Rourke, a 15-year-old freshman at North Hunterdon High School, this project represents the capstone accomplishment of his time with Boy Scouts.

"Once you get into the upper classes of Scouting, you start thinking about your Eagle Scout project a lot," Patrick said. "You think about what is most beneficial to your community. You try to figure out what you want to do and to figure out the various relationships in the community. I'm really proud to make this part of my Scouting career."

While no seeds have been planted yet, O'Rourke said he is in no rush and plans to take it step by step. Already, RVCC has set up two large, green cylindrical tanks in front of the Center to collect rainwater from the roof that will run underneath the garden through an irrigation line and feed all of the plants.

The garden is not the first of its kind around Central Jersey. Four years have passed since the Rotary District 7510 of Central Jersey first latched onto the idea of building enabling gardens around the five counties of Somerset, Hunterdon, Union, Middlesex and Mercer. After successfully partnering with Rutgers University, the Rutgers New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station and the Rutgers Cooperative Extension, the district launched the Rotary and Rutgers: Growing Lives One Seed at a Time initiative in 2011.

Since then, it has established numerous sites around the region, including gardens at Rutgers' Cook Campus, Cedar Oaks in South Plainfield, Mercer County Community College and the Community Access Unlimited Group home property in Roselle. In Somerset County, the Rotary District and various Rotary clubs

have helped fund gardens at Richard Hall Community Mental Health Center and the Carrier Clinic East Mountain School.

This type of initiative with Raritan Valley Community College aligns perfectly with the mission and goals of the Rotary Club, DePrado said.

"There's no better place than Raritan Valley because our visions really parallel each other in vision, in outreach," she said. "And at Branchburg Rotary Club, we're all about our avenues of service. Education is one of them. And this year, our Rotary motto is to be a gift to the world. A garden is a gift to the world."

Editorial Intern Jasmine Wang: jwang@gannettnj.com