

North Middlesex High School Students Raise and Donate 1000 lbs. of Fresh Produce to PACH

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Over the past four years, a group of North Middlesex Regional High School students have been one of the most consistent and unique contributors to PACH's food pantry. Working out of a courtyard at the high school, they created the North Middlesex Community Garden, which produces and donates hundreds of pounds of fresh, organic produce to PACH, providing families with important nutrients otherwise unavailable to them. On October 1, the students hit their goal of producing 1,000 pounds of produce this year, and they continue their work through fall.

"The donations we've received from the North Middlesex Community Garden have had such a profound impact on the families we serve," said Clara Couture, Pantry Coordinator, about the twice-weekly donations PACH receives throughout the summer and fall months. "We're grateful that we can serve families fresh vegetables, fruits and herbs each week."

The garden is operated by a growing number of North Middlesex students, under the guidance of faculty advisor Ray Kane. It is truly a student-driven initiative, with the planting, maintaining and harvesting of the diverse set of produce – 65 different crops in total – falling on the shoulders of students. In addition to the physical upkeep, students are also in charge of financing, which they do entirely through fundraising and grants.

After adding five new beds this year, the students have already outdone last year's total of 750-pounds. They will continue to harvest throughout the fall, staving off frosts and snow for as long as possible. They'll then replant the garden at the tail end of the winter or early spring.

The garden's growth in just a short period of time is astounding. It's clear when speaking with Kane and the students that their passion and devotion is what has transformed the garden from a concept to what it is today: an ever-evolving, diverse and thriving source of organic produce.

It began in 2009, when Kane and a group of students first ventured into the underutilized and underappreciated courtyard to start the laborious process of excavating bushes, clearing room for a six-foot by six-foot plot of soil on which they planned to try their luck growing vegetables.

"I look at it and think of how far we've brought it," said Kane. "When we first started, the space was overgrown. I remember how much of a pain it was to take out these 10 juniper bushes and their huge roots. It was really a process because you can't get any equipment in here. We had to do it all by hand."

Kane was far from a horticulturist when they began. From the start, both he and the students took the attitude that they would learn as they went and, so far, it's worked out well. Each year the energy and excitement surrounding the garden grows.

"These kids worked all summer," said Kane. "You set people up and let them go with it, let them get passionate about it, and it's amazing what they can do. These kids have nothing to gain from being here and we all realize that it's not about us. What we're doing allows us to feed people and feed people healthier options than what they're getting."

"The unfortunate reality is that healthy food options are also the most expensive," adds Mary Feeley, a PACH board member. "If you're a family on a tight budget, fresh vegetables may be beyond your means. What's amazing is that these students understand that and have taken the initiative to help out."

Kane estimates that more than 100 students will be involved in varying capacities throughout the course of a season. There's a small core group that is heavily involved with the decision-making and coordination and then a much larger number that is involved in a smaller role, those who assist in the weeding and general upkeep from time-to-time.

"We had so many people this year and I think it's because they get to do something themselves," said Amber Kelley, a student whose involvement with the garden didn't stop upon her graduation in May. "You come into the garden and you know that you've helped to grow everything in here, which is just an awesome feeling. You have this realization that, I put that seed in and now here I am, picking the fruit off this giant eggplant."

The garden's potential is tied to the aspirations of the students. So, don't expect its growth to slow anytime soon. Two years ago, they installed a hydroponics system, and introduced tilapia this year. Once these fish are full-grown at about 8-pounds, the students plan to donate them to PACH as well.

They're also in the process of making the garden a year-round operation. Recently, they applied for a \$20,000 grant to build a greenhouse so the winter months won't temper the food they donate.

"PACH is immensely grateful to the students involved with the garden and Mr. Kane," said Couture. "We're excited to watch their garden grow over time and look forward to continuing our work with them."