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COMMUNAL GARDEN

Farm re-energizes Stillwater Avenue community

By Maggie Gordon
Staff Writer

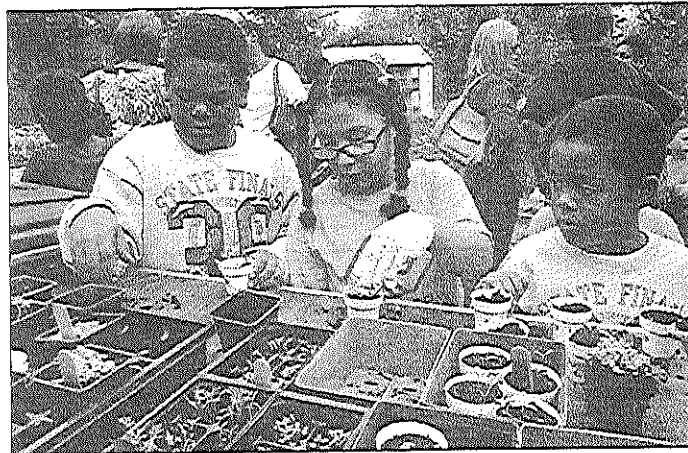
STAMFORD — The grass is getting greener on Stillwater Avenue.

The lot at 133 Stillwater Avenue used to be home to boarded-up, abandoned houses, and a lawn littered with glass and stones. But on Saturday, the community had a chance to take a tour of the property, which is now a working farm, boasting everything from okra and spinach to fig trees and blueberries.

You could call it a community garden, but it's more than that, Charter Oak Communities CEO Vincent Tufo said Saturday afternoon as he stood beside a row of squash at Fairgate Farms during the farm's official opening to the community.

"It's more of a communal garden," he said. "At a community garden, you know, families each get a plot, but here, everyone works on everything, and they will get to enjoy everything."

The farm is the result of a community collaboration between the city's housing authority Charter Oak, Stamford Hospital and other community agencies like the Boys & Girls



AMY MORTENSEN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Boys and Girls Club members Zamir Laforest, 8; Dulce Cabrera, 8; and Michael Laforest, 6, plant basil during the Harvest Festival at Fairgate Farm on Stillwater Avenue in Stamford on Saturday.

Club, which have offered supplies and volunteers.

The hospital and the housing authority developed the idea of the farm as a way to infuse health and wellness into the community on Stillwater Avenue. It will offer residents an opportunity to purchase fresh food at farmers' markets in the future. Produce will also be delivered to the hospital to provide fresh ingredients for patients' meals, according to Pam Ko-

prowski, public affairs director for Stamford Hospital.

Kids from the Boys & Girls Club have already benefited from the farm with the farm's manager, Bill Callion teaching them how to plant and harvest fruits and vegetables, while also giving guidance about healthy eating.

"The kids have been here already. We pulled out a bunch of produce," Callion said, as he bent over to pick a purple



AMY MORTENSEN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Vegetables harvested from Fairgate Farm during the Harvest Festival at the farm on Stillwater Avenue in Stamford on Saturday.

passion pepper from its plant. "And we told them that if you eat food that's a variety of colors, it's probably a lot better for you."

Callion has also taught kids from the Boys & Girls Club about composting, using the compost heap the farm began two lots away.

"We want this to be a learning laboratory for the community," he said.

The farm is still in the beginning phases. The old buildings were still standing at the beginning of the summer, and it was halfway through July by the time Callion was able to begin planting. On the first day of planting, July 15, it was 103 degrees outside, he noted. Sixty-five days later, the plot is green

and growing.

"It's not everything it's going to be yet," he said. More trees will soon be planted, and a greenhouse will be erected so growing can continue year round. The watermelons in the ground didn't get a chance to take off this summer due to late planting, but Callion expects they'll be a nice experiment for next year. In the mean time, he is excited to feed as many people as the fledgling farm can support.

"How much fresher can you get it than you got it today? You pulled it out of the ground," he said.

"This is just so great," said state Sen. Carlo Leone D-Stamford. "It's helped remove blight and it's teaching kids where their food comes from, and providing them with the fruits of their labor."

Tufo said the new look has already sparked a change in the neighborhood.

"People are being much more careful about throwing out their trash on the street," he said. "It's breaking down the stigmas around here."

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