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New York students come to Philly to help build community garden

by NATHANIEL LEE



Volunteers from as far as Wagner College in Staten Island, N.Y., lend a helping hand during volunteer day at Pastorius Gardens in Germantown. — Tribune photo/Nathaniel Lee

Volunteers came from as far away as New York to lend a helping hand during the Pastorius Gardens Volunteer Day located 10 E. Pastorius St. in Germantown on Sunday.

Braving the heat and humidity were students from Wagner College's student-athlete program as well as seniors from the school's Port Richmond Leadership Academy in Staten Island, N.Y., who pitched in to build a community stage, stain picnic tables, spread mulch and do some planting for the garden, which was once an empty lot.

"We're here today helping out with the community garden and trying to give back a little bit and learn a little bit of what's happening here in Philadelphia and how we can relate that to

what's happening in our communities in Staten Island," said Kevin Farrell of Wagner, who said they learned about the garden through Quaker Voluntary Services.

The volunteer students stayed in one of the Quaker houses while visiting Philadelphia. "We were just so excited to get involved and help out," Farrell said. "I think it's beautiful. I think, especially back in New York and Staten Island, we could use more community gardens and this is certainly going to be an inspiration for starting something like this back at home."

Kendle Bramble, a student-athlete in Wagner College's MOVE program, agreed.

"I think it's really important for us to somehow give back to our community and this is the best way to do it because everyone is prospering from having a garden this close to home," Bramble said.

"From a student-athlete point of view, I think every athlete aspires to do something big so that at some point they could give back to their communities and I think this is a direct connection to what everyone is trying to achieve and we're actually using our muscles to do the heavy lifting."

Julian Horner is a local jazz artist and reside on the grounds of the Germantown Mennonite Historic Trust in Germantown where the garden is located.

"I believe in the power of local community and I just think that most of our problems today are best solved with local mindsets because that is where we can actually affect real change," he said.

"If it's as simple as helping our neighbors eat healthier foods, meeting new people, shoveling mulch or building a stage we are building connections and strengthening relationships where we are as opposed to going to D.C. or far outside ourselves and putting all of our power in elected officials."

Joseph Budd of the group Germantown Men Who Care called the garden a great community project.

"We believe it's a great thing for the neighborhood," Budd said. "Transforming a vacant lot into a garden that gives food and vegetables and plants is a beautiful thing for our community and we just came out to support the garden and be a part of its growth."

The garden is a collaboration between many volunteers and community groups throughout the city, according to Vita Litvak of Pastorius Community Garden.

The wood, soil and seedlings used by the garden were gifts from PHS City Harvest, the use of the land on which Pastorius Garden is located was granted by the Germantown Mennonite Historic Trust which owns the grounds and thanks to dozens of volunteers and supporters, the garden now provides some 40 pounds of fresh vegetables and produce for the local community, which includes a nearby soup kitchen that feeds local residents in need and homeless populations.

"We began to organize and plan the garden about a year ago; in August we had our first Planning Committee meeting, we gathered petitions from the neighborhood and altogether there are about 15 of us who have been working tirelessly through the winter to plan the garden and apply for support from PHS City Harvest," she said.