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FEATURED

'The garden is doing its job': St. Mary's community garden produces for those who need it

MOLLY BILINSKI Staff Writer
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'It's just a wonderful thing,' said Darryl Gunter, of Egg Harbor Township, as he worked Saturday morning at St. Mary's community garden in Pleasantville.

MOLLY BILINSKI/Staff Writer

PLEASANTVILLE — Behind St. Mary's Church on Bayview Avenue on Saturday morning, a handful of volunteers knelt in the dirt pulling weeds or walked along the rows, picking tomatoes from the overflowing community garden there.

"It's just a wonderful thing," said Darryl Gunter, of Egg Harbor Township, as he lifted leaves the size of plates, showing the okra growing at the stalks.

“I love seeing things grow and flourish to help feed people,” said Gunter. “This garden has brought people in need of spiritual healing and food as well.”

Volunteers have been working the community garden behind St. Mary’s for almost a decade, planting, maintaining and harvesting to feed anyone who needs it and encouraging others to help tend the plants. But this year, the need for fresh produce has only grown due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“You can see the need, the despair,” Father Hyvenson Joseph said. “The only remedy to this is to plant more. The garden is doing its job.”



And the need is there.

A Stockton University poll released in June showed many Atlantic County residents struggled to feed themselves and their families even before the pandemic.

Nearly 18% of residents said they had run out of food without having money to buy more, according to the poll taken in March. Fourteen percent have skipped a meal because they couldn't afford food, and 17% skipped a meal in an effort to save food for their children.

Of those polled, 35% said they have eaten the same thing several days in a row because the item costs less, while 30% wished they could eat healthier but simply couldn't afford it.

Stockton Professor of Sustainability Ron Hutchinson, who has been helping guide the volunteers, said the garden has produced hundreds of pounds of fruits and vegetables so far, from peppers and tomatoes to corn, cantaloupe, zucchini, cucumbers, onions and squash, as well as basil and other herbs.

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But the effort is also about bringing the community to the church, Joseph said.

“We want to see the community gather here,” he said. “Even when we have advances in technology, the garden is the foundation of life.”

Another volunteer, Tina Mitchell, of Egg Harbor Township, said it's been a learning experience for her after growing up in a city.

“I am learning how to embrace the Earth, plant a seed and watch it grow,” Mitchell said. “It helped me experience God in a way I hadn't before.”



Egg Harbor Township schedules public hearing for tearing down West Atlantic City motels

Food distribution at St. Mary's

The next food distribution is scheduled for 11 a.m. Tuesday at the church, 118 W. Bayview Ave., Pleasantville. It's first come, first served.

Molly Bilinski

Staff Writer

My beat is public safety, following police and crime. I started in January 2018 here at the Press covering Egg Harbor and Galloway townships. Before that, I worked at the Reading Eagle in Reading, Pa., covering crime and writing obituaries.