

Planting roots in the Peninsula

By GENIE DAVIS Contributing Writer | Posted: Wednesday, March 7, 2018 1:35 pm

It all started in 2002 on a tiny piece of asphalt at Palos Verdes High School.

Sixteen years later, a simple garden has transformed into a job skills source for special needs adults and children, and an acre's worth of fresh fruits and vegetables for Redondo Beach restaurant Chez Melange.

Restaurant owner Michael Franks and co-owner/chef Robert Bell teamed up with Lynne Busia, former director of pupil services for Palos Verdes Peninsula Unified School District, to create the Seed to Plate garden.

Today, the garden, now located at Valmonte Elementary School, has students working side-by-side with garden manager, horticulturist and teacher Nancy Lemargie. Special needs students from Transition to Independence and ICAN employment services attend two times a week to learn to sow, to harvest, to weed and to water. All the while, they are also getting lessons in communication, in team building, in completing tasks on time — all excellent job training towards independence.

“The most rewarding thing in the garden is watching students’ faces as they attain skills,” said Lemargie. “Many of the students I have known since freshman year, and now they are nearly 22 years old. Watching them grow and mature into fine young people gives me goose bumps.”

Having such a large space has allowed Seed to Plate garden to expand with a nursery, gift shop, chickens and orchards, according to Lemargie. And though the students may never grow vegetables for a living, she said, some of them might work at a plant nursery such as Armstrong Gardens, a TTI partner.

Busia, one of the program's founders, emphasizes the importance of partnership. It's a partnership in caring, she said that “illustrates the essence, the heart, of the project.”

“Robert Bell, Michael Franks and Nancy Larmargie said ‘yes’ to an idea I had in 2001 that would create a new learning experience for students. Our community partnership in caring began then,” she said. “It is that simple for any partnership in caring to take root.”

Busia points out that the garden's growth in physical size and in scope has been due to the hard work of many. And it's growth means community members can participate too.

The garden is open to the public every second Saturday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Student projects are for sale as well as plants they start from cuttings.



Seed to Plate garden provides fruits of labor

Volunteers Matthew O. and Sarah N. harvest some kale at the Seed to Plate garden at Valmonte Elementary School in Palos Verdes Estates.

“No man is an island, none of this could have been made possible without the community and PVPUSD supporting us,” said Busia.

Getting it on the plate

Chez Melange chef Bell says the challenge of producing enough fruits and veggies for the restaurant is far outweighed by the educational aspect and the inspiration of seeing the students as “our farmers.”

“I think every school should have a garden,” said Bell. “It’s something we need to educate people on for long-term health; kids need to know this. Customers can taste the difference — it’s food that is eaten the day it’s picked, that’s the best part. It’s 100 percent sustainable.” He adds “It’s a wonderful thing to be part of the community, we take great pride in what’s been accomplished.”

All the Seed to Plate administrators agreed it takes a progressive school district such as PVPUSD to recognize the importance of hands-on learning.

For Busia, it’s all about those students.

“I am overjoyed to see students motivated to learn about ecology, to increase their self-confidence, and to develop important skills needed to work collaboratively as contributing members of society.”

Asked her biggest challenges in caring for the space, gardener Lemargie doesn’t hesitate.

“The biggest challenge is keeping the weeds from taking over. Also, we have many trees that need to be pruned. Planting seeds, harvesting are the easy tasks, taming the wilderness is another thing.”

To become a volunteer or give a tax-deductible donation, contact Busia at Seedtoplate@yahoo.com.