

Greenspace grant allows St. Martin de Porres Academy students, HYAT teens to plant trees

By Vanessa Inzitari, Special to the Register

NEW HAVEN — With shovels in hand and smiles on their faces, the incoming fifth-graders at St. Martin de Porres Academy recently helped dig up dirt for the good of their neighborhood and Mother Nature.

Thanks to a Community Greenspace grant, Allison Rivera, vice president of the school, said students were given the opportunity to plant trees and perennials during Summer Academy. A mix of academics and community service, the fifth-grade session of Summer Academy doubled as new student orientation.

“They’re a sharp group of kids. They have a lot of charisma and personality,” she said. “It’s extraordinarily rewarding to see them rise to the occasion.”

Principal Kelly O’Leary, who applied for the Greenspace grant a few months ago, said she was happy to receive it because it provided a way for students to give back to the community, while affording them opportunity to experience “something new.”

“Our students are not exposed to a lot of planting or green ideas,” O’Leary said. “The idea of having them do something they’ve never experienced before was exciting; that’s how you grow.”

For O’Leary, having students plant trees and flowers went much deeper: it was a valuable learning experience that taught them anything is possible. By setting a goal and meeting it and seeing the success of their hard work, the 14 students gained a sense of pride and empowerment, she said.

“It’s really important to give them those successes. It encourages them to do more,” she said.

Incoming fifth-grader Quincy Bookert, 10, said though it was hard work, he was happy to help plant trees and flowers.

“This is a good thing to do so the environment can have more trees,” Quincy said. “We’re also helping people who need more oxygen and animals so they can stay alive.”

Since Summer Academy is mandatory for all students, fifth-graders weren’t alone in getting their hands dirty, Rivera said. Sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders started the planting during their earlier session, and new students picked up where older kids left off.

According to Community Greenspace Manager Christopher Ozyck, the Community Greenspace program is made possible by Urban Resources Initiative, a nonprofit community group lead by the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. Through a grant, receiving community groups are provided with material supplies and technical support needed for such projects, he said.

Grants are awarded to community groups looking to improve the quality of life in their neighborhoods, Ozyck said. Because no actual money is awarded, there is no price cap on a grant. Depending on the type of project a group takes on, Ozyck said Greenspace provides them with as much materials as they will need.

“If they want (to plant) 10 trees, we’ll give them 10 trees. If they want 100,” he said, “we’ll give them 100.”

As Greenspace grants provide all necessary materials such as plants and gardening tools, a community forester is also assigned to receiving groups for technical assistance.

For the St. Martin project, Yale School of Forestry student Marissa Ramirez was the community forester. Ramirez said one of her chief responsibilities was selecting types of

trees to be used. In the selection process, Ramirez said she had to consider what trees would flourish in that area and be most beneficial.

In total, 13 trees of eight different species were planted, along with numerous daylilies, Ramirez said.

Though the project was made possible in part by the Greenspace program, Rivera said it couldn't have been done without the help of the Hill Youth Action Team, or HYAT, a group of teens from the Hill neighborhood.

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