

How their garden grows: City school to send fresh produce to soup kitchen

By Ed Stannard, Register Metro Editor



NEW HAVEN — The students at St. Martin de Porres Academy have been helping out at the Downtown Evening Soup Kitchen, but now they're getting more deeply involved.

This summer, the kids will be growing tomatoes, squash, lettuce and other vegetables in a garden at the school. Then they'll serve them to the guests who rely on DESK for healthful, nutritious meals.

"People help us to be in the school ... and now we're trying to help other people," says Mishell Manrique, 12, of West Haven. St. Martin de Porres is an independent Roman Catholic school. Students attend 10 hours a day, 11 months a year, tuition-free.

"I think it's really important to see the amount of work that goes into just producing a tomato that goes on your plate," says Jeanne May, DESK's operations director and chef.

The idea is to make the connection between green plants in the brown earth and dinner, as well as giving to others.

"I think this is a great project for the students, because they're not only learning about community service and growing the food, but they're doing a complete cycle with us,"

says Diana Richter, executive director of DESK. “There’s tons to learn.”

Every student is required to perform community service. The 4-year-old school’s success was on view recently at the school’s first eighth-grade graduation. All 18 graduates plan to go on to high school, 16 of them to private schools, including Notre Dame in West Haven and Mercy in Middletown.

The younger students who are involved with the garden have been clearing the land, pulling weeds and having fun. The New Haven Land Trust planned to deliver fresh topsoil.

“Me and Nico got into a competition to see who could pull out the biggest roots ... and at the end of the day I won,” says C.J. Perez Jr., 11, of New Haven. Nico Clarke, 12, of West Haven, just smiles.

But growing vegetables doesn’t mean they like vegetables.

“The only tomatoes I can eat are either salsa or ketchup,” says Nico.

“I’m sorry, but I cannot eat squash,” says Cherry Gear, 13, of New Haven.

They have their priorities straight, though. “It’s not about us, really,” says Cherry. “It’s about the people that we’re doing it for.”

She knows first-hand. Besides helping set up at DESK, she helps her grandmother at the Community Soup Kitchen on Broadway.

“The fresh produce is important for a lot of reasons,” says May. “No. 1, the fresher the food, the more nutrients. Most of our guests don’t have the resources to cook fresh.”

Richter says that over the years that May has been making creative nutritious meals, she’s seen the guests looking healthier; behavior in the dining hall has improved too.

Other organizations have helped with the garden, including the New Haven Garden Club and the Yale Sustainable Food Project, but May says it will be most meaningful “for the guests to know that these kids took their time and their effort and their sweat to grow this food for them to enjoy.”

And as a chef, May says, “It’ll be really exciting for me to take what you guys do and actually use it.”

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