

Students learn, help community through HOPE Garden

By ARLA SHEPHARD
MASON COUNTY LIFE

Twice a week, unbeknownst to many in the community, a group of high school students spend their afternoons working to make Shelton a better place — one garden start at a time.

For the second school year in a row, a group from Choice Alternative School is taking part in the HOPE (Hands-On Personal Empowerment) Garden Project, a youth employment program that allows students to become stewards of a community garden, all the while performing community service on the benefits of nutrition.

"All of the students that participate in our program report feeling better about themselves, both with their self-esteem and their health," said Delphina Liles, HOPE Garden coordinator. "I also see that these youth are incredibly excited about how they can make Shelton a better place."

Liles and others involved in the program want the community to know more about what they're doing, including a new expansion of the garden that will include more community beds and possibly a market stand, as well as picnic space for the public to enjoy.

More than anything, they want the program to become sustainable with community investment so that students can continue to benefit from what they're learning.

"I am perpetually surprised and inspired by what students already know

ON THE COVER

Delphina Liles, HOPE Garden Project coordinator, works with Shelton youth to grow produce and give back to the community. Through the program, students learn to garden, do yoga, take leadership workshops and perform cooking demonstrations for low-income people.

Photo by Arla Shephard

about health and that they say they want to make the community a better place, but they need access to programs that engage them and that build their skill set," Liles said.

The HOPE Garden Project took root in 2010, when Liles came to the county-funded nonprofit Mason Matters as an AmeriCorps volunteer.

Liles was charged with helping Mason General Hospital design and run a community garden across the street from the hospital that Mason had donated to the community in 2009.

During the 2012-13 school year, Liles employed seven students who were homeless or at-risk of becoming homeless, from the county-funded Housing Options for Students in Transition (HOST) program, to work at the garden.

That allowed her to demonstrate the benefit of a garden program connected to youth empowerment, which lead to a \$95,885 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's SNAP-Ed program last year.

Liles used those funds to officially start the HOPE

Garden Project with 11 students from Choice Alternative School.

The program is modeled after a similar program called GRUB, or Garden Raised Urban Bounty, in Olympia and is also funded through community partners at the Skookum Rotary and Green Diamond Resources.

This school year, the HOPE Garden Project received \$122,301 from the USDA, which allows them to employ three part-time staff members and pay 16 students \$100 a month during the school year and a little bit more during the summer.

Every Friday, the students take a nutrition and cooking class in the morning, using recipes with ingredients they've grown in the garden, then in the afternoon they either garden or do yoga, switching off every other week.

After gardening or yoga, the students take part in a leadership workshop that focuses on public speaking, communication skills and anti-oppression work based on the GRUB curriculum.

On Wednesdays, the students either work in the garden after school or perform community service through cooking demonstrations at one of the HOPE Garden Project's two partners, Mason General Hospital and Shelton's emergency shelter, Community Lifeline.

Starting in November, HOPE staff will facilitate a four-class seminar for seniors, "Eating Smart, Living Strong," and a six-week series for Latina mothers, "Sisters in Health," at Mason General Hospital, both

of which are geared toward nutrition and making food dollars stretch.

Students will assist the HOPE staff at those classes and perform cooking demonstrations.

Once a month, the students also prepare a side dish for low-income people at Community Lifeline, using ingredients from the garden or food bank.

Also starting in November, HOPE will host a family night at Choice, which will include family-friendly activities and healthy food.

"One of the things we hear most often is that there's nothing to do for youth in Shelton," Liles said. "They tell us they'd make healthy choices if they were available."

The 2,500-square-foot garden will expand at least another 2,500 square feet next spring, allowing students to grow more food that they can take home or distribute to other families at their school.

Liles wants to create a market stand, but is restricted in how she can spend USDA SNAP-Ed dollars, which can't be used to help sell produce.

"Our challenge now is that we don't want to have all our funding in one basket," she said. "We're interested in creating a sustainable program."

Money donated specifically for a market stand could be used for the stand, Liles said.

As far as other needs, HOPE could use more volunteers and in-kind donations, in the form of kitchen and garden items.

"We're looking for some-

one to volunteer specifically with the expansion, someone well-versed in small farm production and landscape design, and also marketing program outreach," Liles said. "We're just trying to get the word out. We're strapped getting the bare bones going, making sure we're there for the kids and maintaining the garden."

Liles and her fellow part-time employees, nutrition educator Rachel Uberman and garden educator Cece Watkins, share the same office in a room leased from Mason Transit Authority.

One of their hopes for the HOPE Garden Project is that eventually they'd have their own space with an office and kitchen for the students to use (right now, the students use the kitchen at Community Lifeline).

"I think overall what we're excited about is with this new expansion we're going to be able to provide more food to more people while also providing a beautiful space," Liles said.

Liles' interactions with the youth in the community continue to give her a sense of hope.

"Students are a lot like the garlic they're planting: Their potential for growth sometimes can't be seen, but if you give the student and plant nourishment, they're going to continue to grow," she said. "Our program keeps growing. The seed has been planted."

To learn more about the HOPE Garden Project, call 252-0621, visit hopegarden-project.org or email sheltonsnap@gmail.com for a schedule of events. ■

Mason County life

YOUR COMMUNITY

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Brent Morris, Publisher

David Nelson, Editorial Director

Marit Bockelie, Special Publications Producer

REPORTER:

Arla Shephard
arla.writer@gmail.com

TO PLACE ADS:

Jessica Ginett
Account Executive
jessica.ginett@kitsapsun.com
360.415.2687

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Vehicular homicide suspected in Shelton fatality

SHELTON (AP) — The Washington State Patrol says a driver crossed a double yellow line and was attempting to pass multiple cars on Highway 3 near Shelton when the driver

collided head-on with an oncoming car.

The Olympian reports (<http://bit.ly/1xvQ28i>) the crash Sunday killed the oncoming driver, 20-year-old Crystal Fern Allmendinger

of Shelton.

The patrol says the driver who was at fault was airlifted to Harborview Medical Center in Seattle and may be charged with vehicular homicide.

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