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Veggie Kids bond with nature, neighbors

By Kia Gregory
Inquirer Staff Writer

With the day's harvest, the youths known as the Veggie Kids travel door-to-door in their West Philadelphia community, hustling sun gold cherry tomatoes, swiss chard, cabbage, and string beans.

On this afternoon, Fallon Hook, a regular customer, buys a bag of tomatoes. A culinary student, Hook, 28, the mother of five, plans to make a salad. But more than a healthy ingredient, the fresh produce represents "something good for the community," she says. "These kids help a lot around here."

The Veggie Kids program, in which children 5 to 16 grow, harvest, clean, package, and distribute fresh produce, was piloted in North Philadelphia last year, delivering nearly a thousand pounds of vegetables and fruits to 22 struggling families at no charge.

This season, sponsored by the local nonprofit Urban Tree Connection, the initiative expanded to a community garden in West Philadelphia's Haddington section, where children offer their harvest to neighbors at \$1 a bag.

"Anything to help the children," says their next customer, Audrey Brown, 80, a widow, holding her newly purchased tomatoes and string beans. "And it's so convenient. Sometimes it's hard to get to the store."

In the Haddington Homes public housing development, most of the 150 families have incomes of less than \$10,000 a year, according to Jan Pasek, spokesman for the Philadelphia Housing Authority. Only 18 percent of the residents are employed.

So far this year, the kids have harvested almost 500 pounds of produce, serving 23 Haddington families.



BONNIE WELLER / Staff Photographer

Kalib Lee harvesting vegetables from the garden on 55th Street between Haverford Avenue and Line Street on Thursday. He and other Veggie Kids offer their produce to neighbors in West Philadelphia's Haddington section for \$1 a bag.



1 of 3

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Table of contents with vertical lines and arrows indicating page numbers.

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The community's garden, on 55th Street between Haverford Avenue and Line Street, sits in a neighborhood of bodegas; the nearest supermarket is eight blocks away. Planters - from broken sewer pipes - decorate the entrance, along with tall trees, and bushes of lilac and lavender. Red flowers, made from wood by the children, dot the chain link fence. The garden has 13 beds of vegetables including carrots, tomatoes, collard greens, squash, potatoes, egg plant, string beans, cabbage, and "decoy corn" for the squirrels.

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This one recent afternoon, off to the right in the play area, once a parking lot, children are sitting at the picnic tables, reading, and learning about nutrition. A handful ride bikes, skateboard or play over the cracked concrete. A few pick raspberries from the orchard, once a dry cleaning plant.

"I like to grow stuff," says 12-year-old Muqmin Cathell, standing near a bed of baby cucumbers, picking tomatoes. After two years in the program, Cathell earned his own vegetable patch.

Through the program, "we build and direct culture," says Hussain Abdulhaqq, 30, a community gardener, who created the North Philadelphia project, and germinates all the beds. With the program for seven years, Abdulhaqq says he's seen grades go up and behavior improve. He's noticed how troubled ones use the garden as an outlet.

"Here they can learn to deal with their problems better than they could on the street," he says.

They also learn entrepreneurial skills, splitting their earnings.

The garden, and the life it brings, has been about a decade in the making.

"It was a barren place," says Lisa Barkley, who has lived in Haddington Homes almost all of her 52 years.

Before it was a garden, Pearl Street, long closed to traffic, residents say, was a shadowy alley of weeds, trash, abandoned cars, broken glass, prostitution and drugs.

A band of neighbors proved to be more stubborn.

"We took it back," says Barkley, standing over the vegetable and herb garden she planted last year.

"Our goal is to make this a nice haven, where kids can play safely. They" - the drug dealers - "know how serious we are, so they won't come back."

"I never thought I'd see it," says Anne Topping, 43, vice president of the newly formed garden club. "But slowly but surely it's coming together, and that's what we want."

Inspired by the effort, residents like Loucradey Davis have planted their own gardens.

"I'm from the South," says Davis, sitting outside on a warm Tuesday afternoon, with pride, "so I'm used to gardens, but I didn't think I could grow anything. But look," she says, pointing to her row of vegetables. "I fried some okra and tomatoes last night."

The Pearl Street community garden has sparked a civic association, of which Barkley is president. The fledgling group has won grants to maintain and expand the community's lush gardens.

Barkley points to a row of flowers outside her home she dubs Shortwood Gardens, a spin on Longwood Gardens.

"If I can't go to suburbia, I'll bring it to me," she beams.

The Veggie Kids' season ends on Halloween with a harvest party. But this winter, Urban Tree Connection and the community are planning for cooking classes, as well as a fall crop. The goal is to expand the program next season; double the square footage of crops and deliver fresh produce to more families.

"They have an image and vision they otherwise wouldn't have," Skip Wiener, executive director of the Urban Tree Connection, says of the Veggie Kids, "and that is taking back the neighborhood for the generation ahead."

Residents like Barkley help plant the seeds.

"This is my life," she says of her garden. "It's an opportunity to work in my community, and give to my community. It actually softens the reality of life."

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More Information

For more information on the Veggie Kids program, contact Skip Wiener, Urban Tree Connection, at 215-877-7203.

Contact staff writer Kia Gregory at 215-854-2601 or kgregory@phillynews.com

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