

Di Ionno: Working at greenhouse farms improves lives of ex-offenders, people with disabilities

The words came from Joshua Handler, whose cerebral palsy has left him wheelchair-bound but has not grounded his spirit.

"We have moved beyond teaching a man to fish — we are stocking the pond."

Fishing in this case is indoor farming, and the ponds are hydroponic greenhouses in places as varied as the Sussex County Fairgrounds and a vacant lot in Orange.

The farmers are varied, too. Up in Sussex, they are people with disabilities. In Orange, ex-offenders. But in both places, their work yields a harvest of healthy, vibrantly green leafy vegetables to sell or donate, and so much more. In Sussex, people get a chance to fit in. In Orange, it's a second chance. In both places, a way to make a real living.

"It is so important for the community to have access to healthy food," said Barbara Mintz, director of clinical nutrition at Beth Israel. "Think of all the fast food and junk food places in the city, and the obesity rates among poor people. As a healthcare issue, we have to teach people how to eat better."

Before the greens go into soups, salads and other comfort foods, they are grown in the comfort zones of people who do the growing. The bubble of these indoor greenhouses is warm and peaceful. Sunlight keeps the temperature up, the glass or plastic keeps the noise out, and the flowing water is a soothing soundtrack.

Walter Barry discovered the meditative quality of gardening while in prison for his role in a 1976 bank robbery in which a guard was shot and killed. Barry was 20 the day of the crime. He got involved in the horticulture program at Rahway State (now East Jersey) and in 1984, he got the idea to create an ornamental garden on vacant land on the prison's back lot. Eventually, he grew a variety of vegetables that won blue ribbons at the Middlesex County agricultural fair.

"The only way I can explain it, is that when I put my hands in the soil, a chemical reaction took place," Barry said, as he adjusted the irrigation hoses at the Orange greenhouse. "It changed me."

Barry, 55, has been out of prison for 18 years now, and has created farm gardens in Newark as part of a group called Prodigal Sons and Daughters, a re-entry program. That group has now partnered with Arthur & Friends through another group called Garden State Urban Farms, run by Lorraine Gibbons.

At about the same time Blanchard was developing her program, Gibbons was working on her urban farming model.

"The goal is simple: fresh food for everyone," she said. "We want to supply local bodegas with good, nutritious, affordable vegetables."

She began cultivating vacant lots in cities to bring neighbors together to grow food for themselves and to sell. The plastic greenhouse in Orange on Tompkins Street next to the Valley Arts Center, is her first.

Walking down rows of both exotic and ordinary greens, Gibbons pointed out the varieties: rouge d'hiver; Tatsoi, a Japanese mustard; Claytonia, the miner's lettuce; baby collards; basil; arugula, green bok choy, dandelions and callaloo.

"In 1,800 square feet here, we can produce 25,000 heads of greens and lettuce," she said.

That's the equivalent of 2 to 3 acres of farmland. Not only is the growth year-round, but constant trickling nutrient-laced water cuts the growth time by a one-third.

"This is very productive farming."

Barry pointed out the varieties can be matched to different cooking cultures, depending on the where they sell.

"The callaloo is used by people from the Caribbean," he said. "So we can market different greens for different places."

Blanchard, Gibbons and Barry want hydroponic greenhouses in every city to train people to work and subsist on the farm. In suburban and rural areas, Blanchard sees it as a way to revitalize agriculture or save a struggling gardening center. Such a greenhouse exists in Hackettstown, where Arthur & Friends have a third hydroponic set-up.

"Everyone loves the idea," Blanchard said. "Why would you not? It provides good food in an environmentally low-impact way, and helps the people who need it most."

One of those is Matt Moore, a young man with cerebral palsy, who is the production manager of the greenhouse in Sussex County.

"Every time we need something done, he says, 'I'll do it,' " Blanchard said. "One day I said, 'Matt is there anything you can't do?' And he said, 'Yes. I can't feel sorry for myself.'"