

Budding senior gardens promote healthy living, community building

By Sarah Wolpoff

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In an appropriate happenstance, the day before Earth Day, red ribbons were cut while dozens rejoiced over two new community gardens installed in the backyards for hundreds residing in two Port Chester apartment buildings.

On a sunny spring day welcoming blue skies during the entire afternoon, elected officials representing different government offices joined a handful of residents at 169 Terrace Ave. and 22 Drew St. on Saturday, Apr. 21 to open the new gardens. After residents placed their hands on colossal scissors to cut the

ribbons together, attendees flooded into the gardens to examine the new beds and buckets of endless seed packets for wildflowers, radishes, squash, sage and catnip, among many other possibilities.

Celebratory ribbon cutting also launched a new registered charity in the state, Port Chester Community Gardens, Inc. The two new gardens, each containing five 4-by-8 beds and a shed with resources, were funded by a \$6,000 grant received in partnership with the Port Chester Housing Authority from the Westchester County Board of Legislators.

The new gardens were modeled off the Housing Authority's first community garden on the grounds of the Weber Drive housing complex, created in 2016.

Alex Payan, Port Chester Community Gardens executive director and founder, was excited to explain the gardens provide residents access to locally grown food while promoting sustainability, healthy eating and civic engagement.



Port Chester Community Gardens Executive Director and founder Alex Payan (left) is thrilled as 169 Terrace Ave. residents Pauline Bush and Helen Delany cut the ribbon opening the community garden outside their senior apartment building on Saturday, Apr. 21. Next to them stands Bob Vyskocil, executive director of the Port Chester Housing Authority, and apartment building resident Bustelo Alberto. Sarah Wolpoff|Westmore News

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"Port Chester is known for great food and restaurants, but this brings in farm-to-table food right here in the backyard," said State Assemblyman Steve Otis.

"It brings community together," added Town of Rye Supervisor Gary Zuckerman. "To have farm-to-table in areas that can be economically challenged is really a great thing."

Both apartment complexes, established by the Port Chester Housing Authority, are subsidized senior housing. Executive Director of the Housing Authority Bob Vyskocil emphasized the gardens are an excellent way to build a sense of community and give residents pride in their home.

The residents agreed, as many repeatedly said they are excited to be involved with a community-oriented project.

"It gives us something to do and a reason to get outside," said Remona Cardona, a resident and commissioner on the board at 22 Drew St. "This was such a great idea. We can all do it together and have fun together."

According to a Community Gardens press release quoting the "Hunger in the Town of Rye" study, 11-13 percent of town residents have hunger issues and 85-90 percent of them live in Port Chester.

Greenwich Hospital was also involved with the project from the get-go and donated sunscreen and gardening kits to residents who will use the plots, said Kathy Carley-Spanier, director of community health.

"Chronic diseases we see all relate to eating (habits) and exercise," she explained. "We saw this as our opportunity to promote and support healthy lifestyles with community partners. The eating healthy and the physical activity in itself."

Gary Stracuzzi, chair of the Port Chester Housing Authority board, said the garden project represents the whole community and different levels of government coming together to improve livelihood. Appropriately, during the ceremonies Payan received proclamation plaques from the Village of Port Chester, Town of Rye, County Executive, County Legislature, and State Assembly.

This is only the first achievement facilitated by Port Chester Community Gardens, Inc. According to the press release, in the future they plan to establish more community gardens, a farmers' market, Earth Day and Halloween events, garden classes and student internship and scholarship programs.