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Middlesex man plants hope one seed at a time

Written by
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Patrick Rotondo is 62 years old and a lifelong resident of Middlesex. He worked in nursery production and landscape industries since the age of 14. For years he worked long days, and he did all seed starting when there was no automation. His satisfaction derived from owning his own business and working for a paycheck. He had to be in control of all situations.

“I never listened to anyone,” he said.

In 2006 he was hospitalized for spinal meningitis. While on the operating table to clean out the infection in his spine he suffered a stroke and brain trauma. Doctors at Somerset Medical Center did not think he was going to make it. He was paralyzed on his right side. He underwent three months of rehabilitation at the Kessler Institute.

Rotondo went into a severe depression not long after his therapy ended. “I couldn’t do anything for myself. I was in a black space,” he said. “I had limitations. I couldn’t get out of this depression. I tried to get out of it. My wife, Roberta, of 32 years and my daughter, Cassandra, 24, were getting depressed caring for me all the time,” he added. “I was a mope in my wheelchair.”

This past winter he started searching seed companies on the computer to see what plants he could grow from his wheelchair in containers on his 12-foot by 20-foot deck.

It is almost impossible to believe Rotondo lived in a “black space” with limited mobility as I watched him recently tend to his plants, moving from one container to another,

reaching, pruning, pinching, weeding, talking, laughing. We were sheltered from the rain by the canopy of magnolia and American redbuds propagated by Rotondo years ago and surrounded by hundreds of seedlings sprouting at various stages of maturity in containers placed and arranged horizontally and vertically for Rotondo to access. His family helped bring materials to the deck, and arrange shelving and containers within reach.

“I have my ability back. I have meaning and purpose, and I love to sweat, too,” he said.



Patrick Rotondo, 62, of Middlesex, tending to the hundreds of seedlings started in containers he and his family have arranged tiered, vertically and horizontally on his 12-by-20-foot deck for ease of access, participation and success. Rotondo has replaced the “black space” of his depression caused by paralysis due to brain trauma with growing plants in container gardens. (PHOTO COURTESY LAURA DePRADO)

Rotondo no longer thinks about his limitations but his abilities to go from his wheelchair, out of the house, to the deck to his plants. His “black space” replaced by green. Lots of it. I counted more than 400 seedlings in numerous containers. He is growing cilantro, basil, mint, carrots, tomatoes, eggplant, peppers, sunflowers, broccoli, radishes, spinach, cucumbers, strawberries, blueberries and corn.

Today, Rotondo can do a little bit of walking. He is living again spending hours a day growing plants and growing with purpose and hope in tomorrow. “It is important to please my family again. I have incredibly good people behind me. My wife and my daughter are proud seeing my daily accomplishments grow. Doing what I am doing now is a high,” Rotondo shared with the biggest smile. “Working with the dirt has turned my attitude and my situation around.”

Rotondo has lots of growing to do on and off of the deck. He plans to work on the green house which is 100 feet away, but not accessible. Before his operation he sought peace and solace at the green house every day no matter what the work day in the industry was like.

“If I could go back to having full ability and mobility, I would keep things simple. I would grow everything in containers, and I would landscape my yard. Before my operation I was a bully. My uncle, Edward Scagliata is my hero. Scagliata started the Midland School in the 1960s serving 60 students.”

The school, located in Branchburg, is a New Jersey-approved non-profit school serving nearly 200 students with developmental disabilities from northern and central public school districts throughout New Jersey. It provides a comprehensive special education program serving the individual, emotional, social, academic, and career education needs of each of its students.

“The work he did for handicapped kids. He lived a simple life. I have respect for him. Now I have respect for people,” Rotondo said.

In reflecting on the man he was before his operation and the man he is growing into, Rotondo said, “Plants and the dirt saved me from becoming a vegetable. I am growing every day. My life is like the song, ‘Life’s a Dance’, by John-Michael Montgomery. I don’t worry about what I don’t know. Life is a dance.”

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