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Healing garden enriches lives of program participants

NewBridge's Enrich Garden is an award-winning horticultural therapy program which offers a space and a place where clients with chronic mental illness learn the skills and responsibilities that come with caring for a garden.

Written by
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NewBridge Enrich Garden in Pompton Plains is a suburban oasis.

NewBridge, which serves Morris, Passaic and Sussex counties and beyond, has a diverse mission. The nonprofit agency builds and manages housing, treats addiction, teaches children and young adults to navigate their world, supports seniors to remain independent and responds to disasters and tragedies. Through its many programs, NewBridge helps more than 10,000 people each year.

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- The Enrich Garden draws clients and community residents together to enjoy the garden's splendor, while helping to ease the stigma of mental illness
- The Enrich Garden and program began in 2001 and serves 20 to 30 clients at a time with a variety of mental-health issues
- The focus is on horticultural therapy, and the growth of the clients who care for the hundreds of plants in the themed gardens

Among the agency's efforts is the Enrich Garden, an award-winning horticultural therapy program which offers a space and a place where clients with chronic mental illness learn the skills and responsibilities that come with caring for a garden.

The garden draws clients and community residents together to enjoy its splendor and uniqueness, while helping to ease the stigma of mental illness. I had the privilege to visit the gardens and clients for nearly two hours while talking about the program and its impact on them and their lives. One client poignantly shared, "NewBridge is bringing the beauty into behavioral health." The Enrich Garden and program began in 2001 and serves 20 to 30

clients at a time with bipolar, schizophrenia, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive, mood and psychotic disorders and severe depression.

The focus is on horticultural therapy, and the growth of the clients who care for the hundreds of plants in the themed gardens. They plant, dig, propagate plants, start seeds, prune, weed, and accomplish all tasks required to keep the garden, which contains more than 500 rare tropical flowers, shrubs and trees from around the world. Clients, with great pride, showed me the variegated English elm, Magnolia grove, and Banyon, olive, fig, topiary ficus, banana and Strangler fig trees. Each specimen is mature, healthy and majestic. And the program offers a space and a place for clients to work at digging, sketching, writing songs or poetry, painting, or taking photos.



The NewBridge Enrich Garden's unheated greenhouse and many of the program's propagated plants including crepe myrtles, geraniums, maples, magnolias, dogwoods and other small potted plants. The area is designed to increase the program's stock plants via propagation, starting seedlings, overwintering young transplants and saplings and protecting the rarest garden specimens. The area also serves as a place for program clients to hone their horticulture pre-vocational skills. Plants in this area need careful daily watering, expert grooming and integrated pest management patrolling. (Photo: PHOTO BY LAURA DePRADO)

Participants learn skills and responsibilities that come with caring for a garden, and in the process transform from the role of cared for, to the role of caregiver, often for the hands-on, goal-driven activities that draw them together socially and provide the satisfaction of a job well done, said John Bierne, a registered horticultural therapist who manages the Enrich therapeutic garden and program.

"Not everyone is a gardener, and not everyone loves or enjoys gardening," Bierne said. "Our job is to find the individual talents of the clients."

As we walked through the themed garden, I travelled on a path of stepping stones that are a tangible example of Bierne's insight. Each stone was designed by a veteran with Post

Traumatic Stress Disorder who does not participate in the social aspects of the program. No two stepping stones are alike and there are at least 50 he created. His contribution in talent and creative expression remarkable.

"The Enrich Garden brings harmony to the surrounding community and allows therapy to emerge from 'behind closed doors' out into the open," Bierne said.

The Garden offers individuals struggling with mental illness the opportunity to build skills for life and vocation, learn responsibility, commitment and follow through, cooperate with others to achieve a common goal, reap the rewards that working and nurturing provide, channel energies into a positive, functional and creative pursuit, and build self-esteem and self-confidence.

"It is here that I dig out my life's frustration," one client said with a big smile.

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