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Horticultural therapy cultivating connections, success for adults with autism

Written by
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This month, the American Horticultural Therapy Association celebrates its 41st annual conference of horticultural therapists, educators and students from around the world and United States, in Lafayette Hill, Pennsylvania. The theme, "Growing Our Future: Practice and Research" reflects a colorful palette across the canvas of horticultural therapy, and facilities where horticultural therapists using nature and agriculture are making a difference in human health and well-being.

Programs serve veterans, patients in long-term residential care, acute inpatient care, rehabilitation, skilled nursing, youth at risk, correctional youth, incarcerated adults, adult day center members, children and adults with disabilities, visually impaired, and children and adults with autism, and their families.

This column serves as a venue to share the horticultural therapy programs growing throughout New Jersey, and the horticultural therapists as part of treatment teams as diverse as the populations being served, cultivating them.

This month I am privileged to write about the horticultural therapy program for adults with autism at The Children's Institute-Center for Independence (TCI-CFI) in Livingston. In 2012 the Livingston campus opened and is the new home of the high school, previously in

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- The Children's Institute-Center for Independence (TCI-CFI) in Livingston began a greenhouse program as a new way to serve adults with autism
- The tiered overall vocational program offers internships, entrepreneurial enterprises, and supported employment
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Verona, and serving 85 school districts. Approximately 80 adults with autism ages 18 and older from Morris, Essex, Bergen, Somerset and Union counties participate in training sessions that emphasize vocational skills.

An extraordinary team at TCI-CFI is deeply committed to making a difference through horticultural therapy. This team is comprised of Dr. Bruce Ettinger, executive director/superintendent; Kim Mitchell-Rushmore, program director; Mary Perez, assistant director; Pat Czarnecki, horticultural therapist; Carol Mainardi, horticulture instructor; and other team members including Matt Clark and Jill Lynch.

"We are the facilitators of education, and we are trying to provide a bridge using horticultural therapy for these individuals to get jobs," Ettinger said. "It is predicted that more than half a million people will be diagnosed on the spectrum of autism in the next 10 years. At the age of 21 all services disappear. 'Falling off the cliff,' I call it and the reason we built the greenhouse."



The Children's Institute—The Center For Independence's new state-of-the-art greenhouse and gardens support the Livingston-based vocational horticultural therapy program for adults with autism. Shown next to the greenhouse are Pat Czarnecki, horticultural therapist, and Kim Mitchell-Rushmore, program director. (PHOTO COURTESY THE CHILDREN'S INSTITUTE—THE CENTER FOR INDEPENDENCE)

The new state-of-the-art greenhouse started out as a \$180,000 project, and has grown to a \$400,000 project.

The tiered overall vocational program offers internships, entrepreneurial enterprises, and supported employment. The horticultural therapy program, Czarnecki said, emphasizes development of vocational skills for TCI adults and designated TCI staff through five components: horticulture, greenhouse management, interior plantscaping, floral design and landscape design.

- Horticulture focuses on plant identification and use, transplanting, care requirements, propagation, production for sale/consumption, adaptive tools, container plantings, pruning, integrated pest management, ethical growing and harvesting flowers, herbs, and vegetables.
- Greenhouse management focuses on the day-to-day greenhouse activities including monitoring temperature, light, water, fertilizer, pest management and other plant needs, greenhouse cleanup and maintenance and inventory management such as ordering, stocking and cleaning tools.
- Interior plantscaping emphasizes in-house service of plant care and maintenance.
- Floral design focuses on basic floral design concepts, floral supplies and materials, flower selection, handling, conditioning (fresh, silk and dried flowers), seasonal, special occasion, and everyday designs, assembly techniques, ribbons/bows/ornamentation, sentiments, packaging, pricing, inventory and customer service.
- Landscape design includes site assessment, design, plant selection, installation, maintenance, and management of small-scale site beautification projects, proper use and maintenance of tools.

Through the horticultural therapy program, Czarnecki said, the team seeks to provide vocational training to help clients develop marketable skills through the five components, promote development of social skills, ability to problem solve and follow direction through interactions with peers, instructors, teachers, customers, employers and the public, and promote personal growth by improving physical, mental, and emotional well-being.

"We are measuring the effectiveness of the horticulture training through various pre- and post-test tools," Czarnecki added.

"We cannot separate the horticulture from the horticultural therapy in this setting if we want CFI clients to achieve success and work in the horticulture industry," Mainardi said.

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