



## Horticultural therapy program for Somerset County youth at risk grows more than plants

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**For the first time in its 45-year history, Middle Earth introduced Horticultural Therapy program in partnership with Horticultural Therapist Laura DePrado, president of Final Touch Plantscaping LLC, Branchburg.** (Photo: ~Courtesy of Middle Earth)

For the past 45 years, Middle Earth, a nonprofit agency serving at risk youths in Somerset County, has served almost 1,000 youths through 12 mentoring, education, employment readiness and college readiness programs.

For the first time this year, a horticultural therapy program sprouted through a new partnership with me, as horticultural therapist and president of Final Touch Plantscaping, of Branchburg. The horticultural therapy workshops in the Art House Initiative Program were made possible in part by funds from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. A series of workshops took place at the Bound Brook Community Youth Center throughout May

and June. Youth from Middle Earth's Promise, Center, and Journeys programs participated. Promise is a probation-based program for youth. Center is open to all Somerset County youth ages 12 to 18, and Journeys is a program for youth who need more intensive life skills and mentoring.

"Up until recently I only knew of the benefits of gardening for me personally," Middle Earth Executive Director Maria Strada said. "Many of the youth in our programs suffer from family conflict, poverty, behavioral and academic issues and poor peer relationships among other things. Middle Earth always looks for ways to creatively impact our youth in positive ways. Horticultural therapy activities offer purpose and meaning in a structured and supportive environment that benefits our youth."



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Middle Earth Christine Hons, program director said horticultural therapy was chosen "because the opportunity for our youth to work with plants is not something they have exposure too. These workshops introduced our clients to an entirely new set of skills and experiences that most would not have had the opportunity to experience otherwise."

Workshops facilitated by myself included individual activities using plants of succulents, annuals, and cut flowers and progressed to group activities of creating flower containers. Participants chose to both take home the individual activities and leave for the Community Center, and decided to display the flower pots outside the entrance of the Community Center. Participants in a pre-assessment of the program expressed interest in gardening. In a post program assessment they expressed strong interest in plants, and working with more varieties both large and small. In addition, all of the participants said they gained exposure to a new skill and artistic outlet.

"This pilot program was very successful," Hons said. "It was so beneficial for our youth and programs that we are interested in collaborating and running again."

Middle Earth is dedicated to providing Somerset County Youth with prevention, intervention, and crisis services to help them to develop into responsible and productive members of the community. Middle Earth programming includes mentoring, employment readiness, juvenile justice prevention, diversion, and intervention, life-skills development, arts exposure, community service, and school based programming. Middle Earth programming works to provide youth with critical resources necessary to develop into healthy and productive adults. These resources include caring adults; safe places and constructive use of time; healthy start and healthy development; effective education for marketable skills and lifelong learning; and opportunities to make a difference through helping others. For information contact, Maria Strada, 908-725-7223, [mstrada@middleearthnj.org](mailto:mstrada@middleearthnj.org), or Christine Hons, 908-725-7223, [chons@middleearthnj.org](mailto:chons@middleearthnj.org).

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