



THE MESSENGER GAZETTE

Cultivating special populations programs at the Somerset County libraries

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The Warren Township Library branch hosted a Special Needs Social Hour program. These programs are designed for adults with special needs to meet new people and explore fun and interesting activities including music, art, yoga, gardening, crafts, and more. This program explored container gardening with Laura DePrado of Final Touch Plantscaping, LLC. (courtesy photo)

Somerset County libraries' Warren Township Library branch began offering programs for adults with developmental disabilities in September 2016. The Library has offered over half a dozen programs thus far, and plans to expand the initiative in the future. The participants have enjoyed bingo, yoga, jewelry making, music, dancing, gardening, and more.

"I am delighted that SCLSNJ offers various recreational and developmental programs for adults in our community with developmental disabilities. These programs offer a chance for adults with

developmental disabilities to socialize and to learn the necessary skills that will help them lead full, fulfilling lives. Too often in our communities, these adults lose our support as they age out of our schools and the essential programs that are offered to them while in school. It is imperative that we continue to support these populations and I thank the Warren Township Library branch for taking the initiative and making a direct, positive impact in their immediate community," said U.S. Congressman Leonard Lance (NJ-07).

Planned and executed by Adult Services Librarian Catherine DeBerry to encourage socialization, these programs provide the opportunity to meet new people, discover the library, get to know their local library staff, experience new activities, and, most importantly, have fun.

Acting as an ad hoc center for individuals with special needs, Warren Township of New Jersey, is an inclusive community with a number of organizations and institutions that support children and adults with developmental disabilities, including: a private residential facility, a day program, several group homes, a regional collaborative public school district that offers services to children with autism, and an autism medical assessment and treatment center.

During initial research, DeBerry learned that as students with disabilities age out of school systems in New Jersey, they and their families often find themselves without recreational activities or other types of programming, and what is available to them is rarely free.

These adults face numerous challenges as they transition out of school, and as a result, struggle with confidence, motivation, and, at times, depression. Because adults with disabilities are living longer than ever before, there are additional needs for planning and providing for their futures.

Recognizing a need, DeBerry realized that the Warren Township branch was perfectly poised to introduce a new service to Somerset County's adult population with developmental disabilities.

One of the most successful programs to date - with its largest attendance and most challenging activity - was presented by Registered Horticultural Therapist Laura DePrado, president of Final Touch Landscaping, LLC. Each participant learned how to pot and care for two springtime flowers.

The activity was challenging, as it involved complex tasks such as following directions and increased socialization and sensory stimulation. However, what was most interesting, as well as inspiring, was how the participants helped each other. They have become friends, in part because of these library programs. They have begun to develop their own social circle - a circle where they can support and care for each other.

DeBerry decided to host a horticulture program with DePrado because research-based evidence supported the physical, psychological, social, and cognitive benefits of horticultural therapy under the direction of a horticultural therapist, who is trained and skilled at creating customized activities and/or garden spaces that accommodate people with a wide range of abilities.

Horticultural therapists are trained to use plants and the cycles of nature to teach life skills and explain and implement social and psychological concepts like nurturing, responsibility, the importance of strong "roots," as well as the value of rejuvenation.

According to DePrado, "Horticultural therapy brings dignity and enhanced skills through vocational, social, and therapeutic programs, and successfully enables and empowers individuals to achieve

their maximum independence. Horticulture programs focus on plants and growing success, on people using seasonally-related plant material to connect and engage in the process of purposeful and meaningful activities that bring benefits to the participants. The plant and the material is secondary."

New Jersey Secretary of Agriculture Douglas H. Fisher said, "Growing a garden and working with plants has been shown to produce many benefits to people, such as physical activity, focusing on a task and a sense of accomplishment. The Department fully recognizes and supports this practice."

"Horticultural Therapy is a great program that enables all individuals to take part and experience the wonderful aspects of working with plants and leaving with a sense of fulfillment. It allows all of us to release the day to day tension that engulfs us and to take the time to enjoy life," said Senator Christopher "Kip" Bateman.

The American Horticultural Therapy Association (AHTA) is the only U.S. organization committed to promoting and developing the practice of horticultural therapy as a unique and dynamic human service modality. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit, AHTA was formed in 1973 to promote and develop the horticultural therapy profession.

New Jersey is the first state in the nation to designate the third week of March "Horticultural Therapy Week," to raise awareness about the viability and value. The law was sponsored by Senator Christopher "Kip" Bateman and co-sponsored by Senator Joseph Vitale and championed by DePrado.

DeBerry believes providing specialized program for adults with special needs is the most meaningful and important work she has completed at the library in her nine years of employment. Patrons are excited to visit each month; their enthusiasm is palpable when they walk in the door. Caregivers, parents, and guardians are encouraged to stay and often do-having formed their own informal support group.

Future programs are already planned at SCLSNJ for April, May, and June 2018. The planned program series, focusing on nature - exploring butterfly plants through demonstration and a craft, exploring honeybees and other pollinators, and a nature scavenger hunt - will allow participants to experience the rewards of nature while also learning about the responsibility they have as stewards of nature as they continue to discover the natural world around them.

It is DeBerry's hope that programming of this kind will be integrated into libraries more widely. With little investment of time, money, or other resources, DeBerry, in partnership with the Library System, knows she is making a difference in her patron's lives - but more importantly these wonderful individuals are making a lasting impact on hers.

Submitted by Somerset County Library System of New Jersey