

Needham's Charles River Center teaches disabled adults how to farm

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Mike Bolio (left) created the horticulture program to help adults with developmental disabilities learn how to farm. [WickedLocal Staff Photo / Stefan Geller]

By Stefan Geller

For the past three years, the Charles River Center, through a partnership with the Needham Community Farm, has been teaching adults with developmental disabilities how to farm flowers, fruits and vegetables.

The program aims to develop employable skills and also provides therapeutic benefits.

The horticulture program was created by Needham native Mike Bolio and is comprised of around 100 individuals from the Norfolk County area with disabilities such as autism, Down syndrome and cerebral palsy.

The program has participants work throughout the entire year, as they plant seeds at a greenhouse in the CRC in early spring and tend to them five days a week until the weather warms. Then, they transfer plants to the plots at the farm and tend to them until harvest, after which they deliver the harvested crops to the Needham Community Council food pantry and the CRC's mobile market.

“It's awesome. It's showing the community that it doesn't matter who you are, you can always contribute to the community that you live in,” said Bolio.

PHOTOS: Needham Community Farm

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The participants in the horticulture program prepare the potatoes they harvested at the farm for delivery. [WickedLocal Staff Photo / Stefan Geller]

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Mike Bolio (left) created the horticulture program to help adults with developmental disabilities learn how to farm. [WickedLocal Staff Photo / Stefan Geller]

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The Needham Community Farm, where the horticulture program operates. [WickedLocal Staff Photo / Stefan Geller]

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Mike Bolio (second on the right) shows the participants how to package the potatoes for delivery. [WickedLocal Staff Photo / Stefan Geller]

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Participant Sean FitzPatrick prepares bags of potatoes for delivery. [WickedLocal Staff Photo / Stefan Geller]

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Bolio created the program in April 2014 after he returned from studying in California, where he received a certificate in ecological horticulture from The Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems at the University of Santa Cruz.

According to Bolio, through the work on the farm the participants learn motor skills, counting and measuring, plant identification, planting and harvesting, communication and community integration skills.

The participants farm many different fruits and vegetables, including lettuce, tomatoes, peppers and corn.

“I’ve been here for over a year and a half now. It’s a great place to come and work on a garden. We have lots of fun doing the gardening or going to the park and helping out with the weeds. I hope to do more planting over the next couple of years,” said Sean FitzPatrick, one of the participants in the horticulture program.

Bolio takes two groups to the farm five days a week, a morning and an afternoon session each comprised of four to eight individuals.

“Essentially our goal is community integration so I blended my passion for farming and gardening with the center’s clients,” said Bolio.

The program also works in coordination with the Drumlin Farm Wildlife Sanctuary in Lincoln, the Habitat Education Center and Wildlife Sanctuary in Belmont and the Hutchins Farm in Concord. Working with these other farms allows the participants to work with chickens, pick flowers for a farm stand, pick apples and work with Nigerian Dwarf goats.

During the winter, the participants work on creating dyes, herbs and teas, while also being taught lessons on horticulture.

“It’s wonderful, they’re a great group and I appreciate this and I hope we can do a lot more this year,” said FitzPatrick.

The CRC provides housing, programs and services for over 950 children and adults with developmental disabilities in the Norfolk area.

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