

Restoring Impact OASIS

MIDDLETOWN -- Impact Oasis, a growing and working farm for adults with autism, was barely open for two months when superstorm Sandy came through the township. The storm left its mark on the farm with dozens of fallen trees and a few downed wires.

Fortunately, the storm didn't damage any structures on the property, where Impact Oasis holds its Transitional Residential/Adult Independent Learning Center for adults with autism. The charitable organization created farm centers to assist students with employment, independent living and social skills.

Mai Cleary, president of Impact Oasis, said the farm was closed to residents for two weeks for lack of electricity because of Sandy, but day classes were still available.

On Saturday, between 20 and 30 volunteers, bundled up in winter gear, took part in a community cleanup to help restore the farm. Duties ranged from collecting fallen branches, moving wood chips, putting up chicken wire, and covering up the swimming pool.

Students from Christian Brothers Academy in Middletown came out for the cleanup. Among them was Mark Mancuso of Sea Girt. It was his first time at Impact Oasis.

It's a really great idea, and I think it's good for the community here," said Mancuso, 17. "There's a lot more damage than I thought there was going to be, but I think we're doing a pretty good job."

Impact Oasis, which opened in September, is jointly owned with the township and is the first farmstead model in New Jersey. The 26-acre property was paid for with \$1 million in contributions to the organization, \$900,000 in township funds, and \$1 million in state Green Acres funds.

The program, for ages 18 to 27, has four residents who live on the property and three part-time day students. Classes run 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday. The four-year vocational and independent living program -- September through May -- is focused on agriculture, food and the environment, while afternoons and evenings are for recreational activities.

Cleary, 53, said Impact Oasis was recently designated by the state as a self-directed money service provider, so parents of autistic children can use state financial assistance to pay its tuition. Supplemental Security Income can be used to pay students' room and board.

"We're trying to make it so parents don't have to hardly spend any of their money, and the rest we manage by fundraising," Cleary said.

Cleary described opportunities at the farm for students, including a vegetable garden for gardening skills, a woodworking table, food preparation classes with a brick oven, and crafts.

"People think I'm nuts," laughed Cleary, whose 24-year-old son John Cleary is an Impact Oasis resident. "But there's so much to do. This is the thing, just keeping them engaged in meaningful activities that they can say, 'Hey I did that'."

A week after Sandy, participants even helped out in Highlands by making soup and bringing it to residents.

The organization is busy working towards its local sustainable goals. It will add two greenhouses -- one hydroponic and one geodesic dome. They have \$24,000 for the project, but \$150,000 will be needed to add both to the farm.

In addition, 35 chicks will be delivered to the farm March 4, and developing pastures for goats and possibly horses and cows is under way, Cleary said. Sheep are also in the plans, so students can learn to shear them and make yarn.

"We want the animals for the students, and also they're going to be taking care of them," said Cleary. "They'll be getting eggs from the chickens, and goat's milk [to make] yogurt drinks (and) goat's milk soap."

For more information on the organization, to apply or donate, call 732-615-9777 or visit www.impactoasis.org

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Kevin Penton. Asbury Park Press. Feb., 2012