

Middletown field to see life as host to autism program

A local parents group is working to transform a seven-acre field into a therapeutic learning center for children and youngadults with autism.

IMPACT (Improving Middletown's Program for Autistic Children Together) is leasing from the township a portion of the Stevenson tract, off West Front Street, to develop a horticultural program for children with autism, a developmental disorder that can have a debilitating effect on social and certain motor skills."

The goal is to build a model so other people can copy it," said Mai Cleary, a Middletown resident and a founder of IMPACT, who has a 19-year-old autistic son. "I think everybody would like something like this for their kids because it's such a therapeutic lifestyle."

At the Jersey Shore, where land is expensive and open space is often hard to come by, IMPACT is hoping to set an example by creating a working farm and gardening program for local autistic students ages 16 and older, Cleary said.

The program will come to fruition with the help and advice of Bob Sickles (a local entrepreneur who leases an adjacent eight-acre tract and whose father farms it) and agricultural experts at Rutgers University. Volunteers with IMPACT will plant peach trees, grow strawberries and a variety of other crops to be harvested mostly by autistic children in a summer program run by the public schools, Cleary said.

Although some crops may be planted in the fall and a deer fence will be set up during the next few weeks, Cleary said the program will go full force next summer. Local teenagers who want to do community service are expected to help out with some of the work. Farm animals may become a part of the farm in the future, she said.

The deal for the use of property that was purchased by the township through the Green Acres program is a good one - IMPACT is paying \$1 a year for a five-year lease, Cleary said. Because of the gravity of the project, a special subgroup of IMPACT, called "Impact OASIS" (Ongoing Autistic Success in Society) was created, she said.

The need for support programs for autistic children is growing, data show.

Statistics released earlier this year by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that about one child in 150 develops autism or a related disorder by the age of 8.

In New Jersey, the study indicated the prevalence to be greater - at about 1 in 100 - but researchers with the study said the higher rate could be related to a heightened awareness of the disorder."

Growing and nurturing plants is actually therapy for people," said Sickles, who runs a market in Little Silver that bears his name. "I think that if . . . picking, nurturing and harvesting the crop is the main goal (of this program) - and not production - then I think it will work well."

Cleary said the produce likely would be sold by IMPACT at the farmers' market in Red Bank.

Research has shown, Cleary said, that there are genetic and environmental components that contribute to autism. Some research suggests that vaccines could be one of the culprits.

Cleary sees the horticulture program as a "positive response to the environment" and a way to give those with autism a chance at gaining self-confidence and the ability to learn a new trade."

The kids can't really get worse, but they can progressively get better," she said.

And Cleary hopes this program will help them do just that.

Kevin Penton. Asbury Park Press. Feb., 2012