

Teen farmers from Lawrence help grow fresh vegetables to feed to poor

By Yadira Betances, Staff Writer

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In the not so distant future, Jesenia Lopez hopes to be a fashion designer whose creations will be worn by top models and noticed by the haute couture.

But these days the 16 year old is dressed in khaki pants, a gray T-shirt, baseball cap and green gardening gloves as she pulls weeds from a tomato patch at Johnson's Highland View Farm.

"It's hard work, but it helps the less fortunate," said Lopez, a senior in the performance and fine arts school at Lawrence High School.

Lopez is one of 10 Lawrence teenagers who are members of the Green Team at Groundwork Lawrence. They are learning about farming from Scott Johnson, who owns the farm on Range Road, Windham, N.H.

The teenagers will be going to the farm once a week until the end of August to work the land and harvest produce, which Johnson then will donate to Neighbors in Need.

Rose Gonzalez said the program has several goals.

"We want to teach them the connection to where food comes from," she said. "We want them to know the value of a healthy community and individuals. Fresh local food tastes better and they eat better."

Eating better is the reason why Neighbors in Need executive director Linda Zimmerman, is so appreciative of getting the produce from Johnson's farm.

"It's just so wonderful to get fresh food, because most of our donations are nonperishable," she said.

"I'm happy as a clam knowing we can provide fresh food to people who can't otherwise get it."

Last year, Neighbors in Need, which has 11 food pantries in Methuen and Lawrence, received more than 1,000 pounds of produce from Johnson's farm, including summer squash, cucumbers, corn, zucchini and pumpkins. Most of the pantries are affiliated with churches. Food is also distributed to residents at elderly complexes.

Johnson, who has been farming since 1995, was more than happy to supply the food pantry with produce.

"I wanted to make an impact by being associated with something good," said Johnson, 40.

Having youngsters come to the farm to help in the production is an extra bonus, he said.

"It's good to get them interested and for them to understand what we're doing here," Johnson said. "They can see the fruit of their labor doesn't come by playing Nintendo."

Jennifer Pagan, 16, understands the message.

"It's not just a job; it's helping out people," said Pagan, a junior in the Human Leadership Development School at Lawrence High.

On the row next to Pagan, Johnson was teaching Christopher Montes, 16, how to pull weeds by using a hoe.

"I think it will be a good lesson for me because of my interest in food," said Montes, a student in the culinary arts department at Greater Lawrence Technical School in Andover.

For others like Gyna Santana, 17, it is a way of performing community service.

"It's hard work, but it's worth it," said Santana. "At the end you feel a sense of accomplishment because you know the little thing you did helped feed a whole bunch of people."

While in the field yesterday, Crismela Minaya, 16, could not help but think of the people who have no food.

"It's sad knowing that," she said.

Working at Johnson's farm is not the only program members of the Green Team are involved in this summer. They are also working at the Lawrence Farmer's Market on Wednesdays, have planted their own vegetables at the community garden on Brook Street in Lawrence and cleaned up parks.

In addition to Zimmerman and Gonzalez, working alongside the teenagers was Bob Behrens, 71, vice president of the Neighbors in Need board of directors.

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Jennifer Pagan, 16, front, Randolph Escobar, 17, left, and Giovanni Pagan, 16, far right, pull weeds among tomato plants at Johnson's Highland View Farm in Windham, N.H.. The teenagers are members of the Groundwork Lawrence's Green Team and are tending fields whose harvests will be donated to Neighbors in Need, which distributes food through food pantries. Staff photo