

Program Spotlight: The Kula Urban Farm

At the Kula Urban Farm operations continued throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. While some programming had to pause, the greenhouse and garden beds continued to produce fresh produce throughout.

During the pandemic, most of the produce grown at the farm was donated to the Asbury Park Dinner Table project, which provided free meals for local families who were struggling to purchase food due to pandemic related job loss.

The Kula Farm operates as a social enterprise, relying on the sale of produce to fund its produce donations and its workforce development programs. As the pandemic began and area restaurants were forced to close, the farm temporarily lost many of its regular restaurant customers. However, the Farm team quickly got to work on an online marketplace and began to sell produce to the general public, creating a whole new base of customers for the farm as society and our restaurant partners return to normal.



Kula Urban Farm Restaurant Customers

Another impact of the pandemic was a temporary halting of our Kula Farm Experience jobs program. Due to safety protocols, opportunities for non-essential workers at the Farm were limited. However, we were able to keep a core team of six working to ensure the greenhouse and beds continued to thrive. Matthais Van Oosterhout and Lisa Bagwell manage the farm. Ewelina Makowska is the assistant greenhouse manager. And, rounding out the team

is Charles Ade, Chuck Thomas, and Nico Durant. This summer we are finally able to welcome back additional seasonal workers and volunteers.

The Farm continues to cultivate the “Turf” Farm Without Borders site at the intersection of Springwood and Atkins Avenues along with the undeveloped lot located between the Kula Farm and the Bethel AME pantry on Atkins Avenue. This spring, a third Farm Without Borders site was established on city-owned land located at the intersection of Springwood Avenue and Avenue A.

“The impact of the Farm on the community is often measured in pounds of produce or hours of work, but I believe the true influence lies in the physical change of a once empty lot into a dynamic growing space. Urban farms provide a place where people can connect with their food culture as well as nature. They can have a very real impact on our mental health, maybe by just offering the space to appreciate the beauty of a sunflower,” says Lisa Bagwell, farm manager.

The Kula Urban Farm produces approximately 6,000 pounds of fresh produce annually, donating up to 4,000 pounds to community members, food pantries and meal programs.

As the pandemic eases, workshops have resumed at the Kula Farm. Farm to Table Dinners are also scheduled to resume later this summer. You can sign up for the Farm newsletter or inquire about booking a Farm to Table Dinner by emailing info@kulafarm.org. If you have a knowledge of gardening and are interested in volunteering at the farm, please contact Lisa Bagwell, Farm Manager at lisab@interfaithneighbors.org.



Colorful Swiss Chard grown hydroponically in the Kula Urban Farm Greenhouse.

Save the Date for the Joseph J. Marmora Golf Outing



Please save the date of Monday, September 20, 2021 and join us for Interfaith Neighbors’ annual Golf Outing at Deal Golf & Country Club. Sponsorships and foursomes are available now! Visit www.interfaithneighbors.org/golf

MacroBites at the Kula Cafe

With the onset of the pandemic, Interfaith Neighbors’ Kula Café, which served as an innovative workforce development program, temporarily closed its doors. Interfaith Neighbors has made the decision to cease its operation of the Kula Cafe and has leased the space to MacroBites, owned and operated by three young men from the local community. Please stop by and visit MacroBites and enjoy their healthy eating options! You can read the full story of the MacroBites transition at www.interfaithneighbors.org/bdc/macrobites-market-kula.

Want to get involved at Interfaith Neighbors?

There are lots of ways you can help!

GIVE • LEARN • VOLUNTEER

To learn more about the community issues we address or for more information about volunteering, joining our team, or ways to give, visit: www.interfaithneighbors.org or call 732.775.0525.



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Donor Spotlight: Funding Growth

Interfaith Neighbors, Inc. received its first grant from the Elizabeth & Baretts O. Benjamin Charitable Foundation in 2011. To date, they have provided philanthropic support totaling \$245,000 changing the trajectory of many lives served by Interfaith Neighbors.

The Benjamin Foundation works to share the legacy of Mrs. Elizabeth Benjamin, a strong, independent woman who was ahead of her time in many ways. Their grants are focused in two areas - supporting adolescent girls and older women through their W.I.S.E. (Women of Independence, Strength and Education) Initiative and a focus on youth development and college access with a special focus on Monmouth County, where Mrs. Benjamin had lived for the majority of her life.

Since the start of our relationship with the Benjamin Foundation, they have been a wonderful partner investing in new ideas and programs designed to serve individuals from the greater Asbury Park area striving to change their futures.

“The Benjamin Foundation was our first investor in Interfaith’s new social enterprise, the Kula Cafe, back in 2012, designed to prepare young adults for work in the expanding hospitality industry in Asbury Park and to bring a local eatery with healthy options to the Westside neighborhood,” says Paul L. McEvily, Executive Director of Interfaith Neighbors.

He continues, “They funded the concept and stuck with us as we got the initiative off the ground. They believed in our goal to train young people from the community with the basic skills they would need for that first job and those

Funding Growth... (continued)

specific skills to be successful in a local restaurant. We learned a lot in those first few years. Primarily, that many of the people we were training needed help with more than just training for a job. They were facing challenges around transportation, childcare, housing, etc.”

Two years after Interfaith Neighbors launched the Kula Urban Farm, the Benjamin Foundation took another leap with us as we expanded our workforce development programs to include the Farm Experience Program, targeted to those individuals who were returning to the workforce needing a short-term work experience to kick-start their job search. In 2016, they allowed us to apply their funding to both the Kula Cafe and the Kula Farm training programs.

The Benjamin Foundation’s consistent funding over the years has allowed Interfaith Neighbors to develop, grow and refine its workforce development programs. Most recently, the Benjamin Foundation continues to support us as we announce the opening of the Launch Center. The Launch Center, a collection of programs and services that meet people where they are, address their barriers to personal and economic success, and help them to identify their goals and a pathway forward to achieve those goals. All of Interfaith Neighbors’ workforce development programs now fall under the Launch Center along with our SOAR career training program and our Business Development Center.

“The Interfaith Neighbors team has done an impressive job designing creative programs to train Asbury Park youth for local employment opportunities,” says Peter Lasser, Chair of the Benjamin Foundation Board. “They pay close attention to the full array of supports that program participants need in order to be successful, and have also developed strong and effective relationships with the broader community.”

We are grateful for the consistent and loyal support we have received from the Benjamin Foundation. Their support has truly changed the lives of over 100 individuals who have benefited from these programs.

Neighbor Spotlight: Nico Durant - Soaring to New Heights

Nico Durant connected with Interfaith Neighbors in early 2020, when he applied to enroll in IFN’s SOAR program’s newest career track - solar technician. Having just established a partnership with a local solar and roofing company, Solar Landscape, to initiate a training program for solar installation, Nico was selected from a pool of candidates to join in the training program when the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

IFN worked with Solar Landscape to design an online, shortened version of the training program to ensure we kept Nico and his peers in the program as we waited to see when the pandemic would ease. Nico participated in a three-week virtual program with Kerwin Webb, SOAR’s Education Specialist focused on developing a growth mindset, professional behavior, and positioning oneself for success on the job. He then moved on to a two-week online training program with Solar Landscapes, which he passed with flying colors. Unfortunately, due to the set backs caused by the pandemic, Solar Landscape was then not hiring.

However, during Nico’s time with Interfaith Neighbors, he had expressed in interest in working outdoors and was intrigued by our Kula Urban Farm. The SOAR team was so impressed by his drive and attitude that they recommended the Farm bring him on as a part-time employee. This was a perfect fit as the Farm had been forced to temporarily halt its jobs program due to the pandemic and they needed the extra help. Turns out, it was a perfect fit for Nico too. Nico is still working at the Farm this summer. He also used the skills he learned in the SOAR program to leverage his position to land a second part-time job at Good Feeling Farms, another local grower.

This spring, as Solar Landscape began to restaff, they reached out to SOAR and asked if we would like to refer a SOAR colleague for a position they had open. Nico was the first on the list. During the spring

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Soaring to New Heights...(continued)



Nico Durant preparing beds for cucumber planting at the “Turf” Farm Without Borders site.

months, Nico participated in a 5-days a week hands on training program with Solar Landscape, which he successfully completed. His first on the job project will begin in July.

Nico is just one example of the many individuals who have come to Interfaith Neighbors for help in finding a job or advancing their career.

Interfaith Neighbors has three employment programs along with the Business Development Center that help area residents position themselves for success. After discussion on how the agency might best position these programs for the community’s use, the programs have been consolidated under one heading entitled The Launch Center.

“The Launch Center is a collection of programs and services that meet area residents where they are in their personal development, helping to address barriers that are unique to each person and help them identify their goals and pathways forward to achieve success,” says Gillian Edgar, Launch Center Director. Over the years, Interfaith Neighbors has learned that not everyone fits into the boxes of the workforce programs we have established. The Launch Center is designed to flex in response to their needs.

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Soaring to New Heights...(continued)

The Launch Center brings the training curriculum designed initially for the SOAR program to more people. Not just those looking to move on from entry-level positions, but young adults just starting their work lives can now benefit from this training. The Launch Center will also allow Interfaith to reach those that had been left out of our earlier programs by including older individuals looking to re-tool for the modern workplace or those coming out of incarceration or recovering from substance abuse.

Beginning this summer, the Launch Center will be moving into the storefront adjacent to Interfaith Neighbors’ Business Development Center on Springwood Avenue in Asbury Park. The new space will have classrooms, computers for local residents to use in their job searches, a job positing board for local employment opportunities, and a staffed “Help Desk” that will connect residents to needed programs and resources.

Interfaith Neighbors’ SOAR program will operate out of the Launch Center. It currently has six career tracks including Business Office Support Specialist, Commercial Driver’s License, Computer Service Technician, Solar and Roofing Technician, Automotive Technician and Health Care specialty paths. The SOAR program includes an eight-week training program followed by career-path certification education and credentialing. Interfaith Neighbors also offers two workplace experience programs for those just entering the workforce or returning after an extended absence. The Farm Experience Program provides short-term employment and references. The Level Up program provides paid work placements at local employers with the opportunity to convert to permanent employment.

“The way that Interfaith Neighbors helped me realize my potential and guide me to pursue jobs I was interested in has led me to a whole new place in my life. I enjoy going to work at the farm and my new role at Solar Landscape is the start of a new career,” says Nico.