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## Well-Grounded



A horticulture program grows as part of Elizabeth Garvey's mission to help the visually impaired

*By Shawndra Miller*

Student-planted gardens dot the leafy sanctuary that's home to the Indiana School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (ISBVI). Every day throughout the school year, its students – from elementary-age through high schoolers – are introduced into a world of green and growing things.

Elizabeth Garvey started the horticulture program 25 years ago. Now the 63-acre campus on Indianapolis' northside boasts mature crabapple and locust trees that she and her students planted as saplings. A well-established greenhouse, added in 1997, forms the beating heart of the program. Against its front wall, potted vegetables and a lavish bed of swamp milkweed soak up sunshine. Houseplants and herbs flourish in the shelter of a box elder out back.

Elsewhere, numerous instructional plots augment the grounds, inviting curious hands to touch and noses to sniff. There's a "tire garden" featuring herbs in tires that were cleaned and painted by the youngest pupils. A Shakespeare garden surrounds a bust of the bard with plants appearing in his plays and sonnets. The "alphabet garden" gives a vegetative A to Z in a row of upcycled chimney flue liners. And as of this year, runoff from the bus pad filters through a rain garden planted with help from Butler University students.

Garvey and her students tend all of them, keeping the grounds beautiful and enriching campus life in the process.

"Our overall philosophy is that we need to get these kids as much exposure to what they can't see as possible," she says. Her mission is to share her love of the plant kingdom with children who might otherwise never encounter it. Like most technology-obsessed young people today, ISBVI students spend the majority of their time indoors. With the added hurdle of low vision or blindness, many need an extra nudge to go outside and get active.

Under Garvey's tutelage, some 500 students' worlds have expanded over the past quarter-century. Many start out feeling trepidation or outright fear in the garden.

The first time 18-year-old Tyrone Thompson touched a plant in the horticulture class, he wasn't sure how to react. The Gary native didn't have much history with gardening, and little incentive to start, at least until he came to ISBVI.

Of that first brush with unnamed flora, he remembers, "I didn't know what it was, and I thought it was going to bite me or something. But I touched it, and I actually felt kind of a pulse, because plants are alive; they just take a really, really long time moving."

That was about six years ago. Now a graduate, he knows more about plant propagation and landscape management than most youths with

20/20 vision. But his main love is a red cart dubbed the Horticultural Hauler. Thompson, who considers himself the “greenhouse mechanic,” found a niche taking care of this and other carts used to transport plants, tools and pots from Garvey’s classroom to the greenhouse and other gardens.

“He loves anything with wheels,” Garvey says. “Old wagons, anything that needs to be moved from Point A to Point B, he’s your man.” Not only did he put new tires on the Hauler, he added a cup holder in front and a hitch in back. When the maintenance man put flames on the sides, the transformation was complete.

Though Thompson couldn’t purchase the cart as he requested upon graduation (because it’s state property), he has first dibs when it finally breaks down for good and needs to be tossed out. Fittingly, he wants to eventually repurpose it as a planter.

Classmate Tori Carmichael, 18, has a physical impairment affecting her right arm, but she doesn’t let that slow her down. For a while, the sophomore was the only girl in class. “The guys were asking me if I needed any help,” she says, “and I was like, ‘No, I’m good.’ I manage with just one hand.”

In one short year in the program, she’s become adept at weeding, pushing a wheelbarrow, transplanting, potting and shoveling. The whole rest of her school day, she says, she’s “just sitting.”

“I want to be active and move around and do something.”

At her old school, she wasn’t even in class with her peers but was expected to work in solitude in an office. “I wasn’t really part of the class, and it made me feel uncomfortable,” she says. “So coming from that experience to here, it’s been a true blessing that I get to do some of the stuff that other people can do, and I get to be involved.”

Another blessing: The very act of gardening, she says, “releases stress for me.”

Graduate Leon Walker, 20, plans a career involving animal care, yet he’s already thinking about what plants he should have in his yard once he’s living on his own. “When I get a house,” he says, “I’m going to figure out to plant some stuff, but it’s going to be awkward because I’m going to have dogs. I don’t know what I’m going to plant.” He ticks off the varied sun and moisture requirements of different plants, considering.

Would he have thought about landscaping a future home prior to his involvement in Garvey’s landscape management classes? He

isn’t sure, but one thing is clear: The work habits he’s gained from the program will serve him well. Working as a team, following instructions and showing up regardless of inclement weather, these skills transfer to any job.

Thompson, Carmichael and Walker all have low vision, but Garvey works with kids with all levels of visual impairment, including blindness. She teaches landscape management to upperclassmen and basic gardening to the elementary-age children. Class sizes are capped at eight students to allow her to give targeted attention to her charges.

“It’s very student-specific in how we approach what they learn and what they need to get out of the class,” she says. Depending on how much vision they have, she imparts skills by guiding the students’ hands, modeling the correct movements.

“Some kids have really good tactile skills and can fill pots or wash pots,” she says, “but a lot of kids don’t, so that connection between the brain and fingers is not there.”

Garvey makes sure to capitalize on each child’s strengths and interests. She sets her students to work in teams, where each one has a role that fits his abilities.

To draw the children in, she favors plants that engage a sense other than vision. Interesting textures, flavors and fragrances abound. For their rubbery texture, succulents are a winner, and fuzzy-leaved plants have great appeal.

In hopes of anchoring children's school memories through their sense of smell, she introduces them to about 20 varieties of aromatic herbs. Other "scratch and sniff" plants include Giant Iboza, Trailing Plectranthus and Cuban oregano. And one of the best-loved plants is an easy-to-grow houseplant called grandfather's pipe, which produces a fragrant flower spike.

Finally, tasting the many varieties of fruits and vegetables grown on-site gives students a greater appreciation of the origins of their food, not to mention the sweetness of a ripe homegrown melon, raspberry or tomato. In the fall, the students will make salsa with tomatoes and peppers they've grown. Last year, their persimmon harvest went into cookies and ice cream using honey from ISBVI beehives. (Introducing beekeeping and honey production into the curriculum is another of Garvey's projects.)

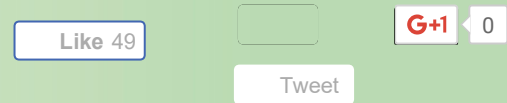
Not only do the students experience the thrill of growing things, they also participate in the program's fundraiser. Several times a year the greenhouse opens to the public for a big plant sale. In spring, the biggest sale features herb and vegetable starts, hanging baskets and flats of annuals and perennials. Houseplants are the main event at the fall sale. Proceeds support the horticulture program, and the experience gives students a chance to practice their social skills while expanding into the financial and publicity realms.

Noting that people come from all over Indiana to patronize these sales, Garvey says it's rewarding to think of the students' seedlings and houseplants going to homes from one end of the state to the other. "We have wonderful customers who come back year after year and like to support our program because they

believe in it," she says. "That makes me very proud because these kids are not just sitting around. They work very hard."

Clearly, so does Garvey, whom Thompson calls "the best horticulture teacher."

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