

Kids Grow For Good

By Emily Leone

The Squirrel Hill Community Food Pantry has been given a helping hand, and a summer harvest, from local students, both old and young,

Preschoolers from Congregation Beth Shalom's early childhood development program have donated home-grown vegetables that they have planted and cared for, while the University of Pittsburgh's Plant to Plate program supplies SHCFP with fresh produce from its Central Oakland plots.

Led by Amanda Bilak, interim early child director, the preschoolers started planting right after Memorial Day. Three classes, with about 20-30 kids in total, take turns watering, weeding and checking on the plants. They've planted versatile, family-favorites, including tomatoes, squash and zucchini.

The project, a first for Beth Shalom preschoolers, is meant to engage the 2- to 4-year-olds in a number of ways. Kids are learning where their food comes from and about giving back and helping those in need, Bilak said.

"Part of our program for our preschool kids is building a sense of community, not only in the classroom or in the synagogue, but with the whole Squirrel Hill community," she says. "We do have families from the school and from the community that use the food pantry."

Meanwhile, Pitt's Plant to Plate program is teaching urban gardening to students who in turn donate more than 50 percent of their yield to the SHCFP.

Justin Seaman, president of the organization, which is supported in part by the Hillel-Jewish University Center, said the idea to donate came from past volunteer projects with SHCFP.

"It's a great way to bring high-quality produce to people who may otherwise not have access to it and for our hard work to stay within the Pittsburgh community."

Campers from the JCC's Emma Kaufman Camp also donated "camp grown" produce to the pantry. Donations go a long way to help organizations like the SHCFP fill the gap for those who may not have enough to eat, says Becky Abrams, food pantry director.

"There are families right here in our community facing food insecurity. In addition to supplying them with staples like grains and dairy products, it's important to provide families with other nutritious foods, like fresh produce," Abrams says. "And to know that that produce was grown by members of our community is even better."



The SHCFP, a member of the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank, offers a grocery store-like shopping experience to families eligible for food assistance and living in the 15217 zip code area. SHCFP also maintains a kosher section for those clients who keep kosher. Those who keep kosher but live outside of this zip code and qualify for food assistance may also utilize SHCFP.

Last year, SHCFP distributed 207,400 pounds of food to almost 1,300 people. Since opening in their new, larger location in Greenfield in November 2010, and since the onset of the recession, the pantry has seen an increased number of individuals and families needing assistance.

Volunteers are a large part of how SHCFP's helps so many people. In fact, more than 300 generous people have donated their time in the past year.

Outside of volunteering, there are several ways to help, Abrams said. Individuals can host a food drive or watch for sales at the supermarket and buy for themselves and the pantry; personal care items and kosher foods are always needed. Many giving options also exist for those looking to make an immediate, financial impact.

"We are so grateful for the hard work that the kids have put into these gardens," Abrams says. "Anytime the community gets involved and helps out neighbors in need, we all reap the benefits." 🌱

For more information on SHCFP services, or for how to donate or volunteer, please visit www.sqfoodpantry.org or call 412-421-2708.