



Brand new: Gather New Haven to promote healthful food, environmental stewardship

By Mary E. O'Leary

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Nikki Saccocia at the Pond Lily Preserve in New Haven

Photo: Contributed photo

NEW HAVEN — Nikki Saccocia was doing what she likes best.

One of the newest leaders at the New Haven Land Trust, Saccocia was walking along the West River, cutting bittersweet vines that will strangle the trees if left alone, as she also gathered material for an educational video to share with the public.

While they were working a short distance from busy Whalley Avenue, it was quiet, the only sound coming from the fast moving river near East Ramsdell Street.

It is just one example of the environmental groups in New Haven that work together to introduce and protect the natural beauty of the area to more residents.

Across the city, Zuiryliz Osorio, 15, was planting peas in a New Haven Farms growing site – this one on Ferry Street in Fair Haven, one of its four main farms that will feed families in wellness programs or sell produce sold directly to restaurants or at a farmer’s market.

Zuiryliz, a sophomore at High School in the Community, is part of the Young Entrepreneurs, who learn carpentry and some business skills as they eventually pitch a product they can make from the crops they are growing.

The land trust, with its more than 50 community gardens that serve over 800 individuals and families, merged with New Haven Farm on Jan. 1, bringing together organizations that have always collaborated.

On Monday, after six months of working to integrate their programs under the leadership of Interim Executive Director James Farnam, he will introduce the new name that reflects its new mission.

Gather New Haven is the latest entity to bring hundreds of people together to promote healthful food and renew a commitment to the environment. “Neighbors and Nature Thriving Together” is the new sounding call, Farnam wrote.

“Gather New Haven promotes health, equity and justice for people and the environment by cultivating connections with each other and our local lands and waters and by inspiring us to care for ourselves, our community and the natural world,” Farnam wrote.

The New Haven Land Trust, founded in 1982, was the state’s first urban land trust. New Haven Farms came into existence in 2012 as part of Fair Haven Community Health Care’s successful diabetes prevention program where patients help grow healthful food, get cooking tips and listen to health lectures.

“Gather New Haven emerges at a time of immense and pervasive uncertainty when we cannot gather physically. We are acutely aware of how this crisis has highlighted the critical importance of safe ways to enjoy and steward our open spaces and natural resources. Even now we are engaging with our community to weather this crisis together and emerge connected, resilient and strong,” Farnam wrote.

Despite the global pandemic, Farnam said Greater New Haven plans to keep the community gardens and the farms in place, where last year they raised more than 30,000 pounds of organic vegetables.

They will continue to recruit high school students to learn carpentry skills by building beds and enterprise skills by creating new products. Zuiryliz said her idea is to produce a lip gloss that will incorporate garden items, essential oils and coconut oil with a gloss base. She would be responsible for marketing it.

As for the actual farming, Zuiryliz said she loves building the individual beds that families use.

During the school year, she and Josephine Jacques, 18, a Hillhouse High School student, work five hours a week but that increases in the summer when the entrepreneurs are paid around \$11 an hour through Youth at Work.

The director, Esther Rose-Wilen, said they hope to continue to have 18 students involved in the Young Entrepreneurs

Saccoccia, who came onboard in February, said her job is to provide more programming for the organization’s six nature preserves that will attract a larger portion of the city’s residents to get out and enjoy them.

Tyre Pendergrass, president of the Gather New Haven board of directors, said they are looking ahead to the end of the pandemic, but have rules now in place to practice social distancing in the gardens.

A resident of the Beaver Hills neighborhood, Pendergrass said the organization has a track record of bringing people together and they will continue to do that.

While people are spending a lot of time inside, they are also engaging in simple things like taking a walk with family and there seems to be an increasing appreciation of nature, she said.

She has also heard from the teens in the entrepreneur program that there is an appeal to simply working in the dirt, growing things they have planted themselves and then sharing with family.

Pendergrass said gardening is also connecting generations from the teens to parents and grandparents who often are gardeners themselves.

Farnam hopes they can continue to offer its Schooner Sailing camp, where last year more than 400 children, with a large number supported through scholarships participated, but that is not certain.

In any event, Farnam said they will look to offer alternative programs where kids and families can explore New Haven's harbor and waterways.

"Gather New Haven is more than a combination of two organizations. It is a fresh take on our commitment to the people and natural places that make New Haven a treasure. Our name manifests the central importance of human relationships in our work: friendship, family, togetherness, community," he wrote.

He invited residents to explore the programs at www.gathernewhaven.org. They also can be reached at 203-562-6655 or info@gathernewhaven.org

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