

Growing Aspirations:

The Healthy Living Initiative Community Garden

The landscape on John Tipton Boulevard in Pennsauken is dotted with warehouses and corporate offices, a stretch of industrial real estate nestled conveniently near major highway systems.

In the midst of the manufacturing sites and within 50 yards of the endless parade of 18-wheelers that roll through daily, something green and wonderful and life-affirming has taken root on the grounds of the Food Bank of South Jersey this summer: a vegetable garden.

The garden is the vision of Raquel Moreno, Senior Manager of FBSJ's Healthy Living Initiative (HLI). Its beginnings were jump-started last year, the result of a casual conversation between Raquel and volunteer/gardening enthusiast Joanne Elvert. Joanne told Raquel about the *Sow It Forward* Food Garden Grant, awarded through Kitchen Gardeners International. FBSJ applied and became a 2014 grantee.

The grant included \$300 cash, a \$100 Gardener's Supply Company gift card, and \$55 worth of seeds from the Ark Institute. FBSJ volunteer Karen Sutton helped solicit additional funding for the project, and Home Depot and Lowe's contributed essentials like a water barrel, soil, a wheel barrow, and hoses.

With professional guidance from FBSJ volunteer Barry Cyphers (a horticulturist), plans for a 92-foot-square garden took shape. FBSJ Operations staff prepped the grounds and helped install the raised garden beds in early summer. The initial plantings in July included parsley, tomatoes, basil, and peppers.



More Than Just Fresh Produce

The fresh produce harvested from the garden has been put to good use in the HLI recipes prepared at FBSJ's demonstration kitchen, but Raquel's aims are much higher. Her plans are to incorporate community-garden education into HLI classes and to encourage more agency partners to start gardens that benefit their own communities.

“Our Healthy Living Initiative program will soon be sharing videos through social media sites that teach basic gardening skills and show cooking demonstrations that incorporate the produce grown in our garden,” noted Raquel. “Our hope is to instruct and inspire. Ultimately, we want to help transition agency partners to a model that includes more self-sustaining practices and skills sets.”

Raquel has had plenty of help nurturing and maintaining the FBSJ Healthy Living Initiative Garden through its first season; approximately 15 volunteers (including members from local garden clubs) have chipped in their support with watering and weeding, and Barry Cyphers and his wife Denise have provided labor and expertise on everything from spreading topsoil to determining plot sizes and plant locations.

Raquel’s ambition is to someday add a greenhouse on the FBSJ grounds, so that fresh produce is harvested *year-round*. “How cool would that be?” she asks, planting yet another seed.