Local Flavors: A Journey Through CT Farms at KOCO

By London Brazal

With the help of a $50,000 grant from the Connecticut Department of Agriculture, the Kids of Chatham Organization, better known as KOCO Child Care Center, recently opened a garden in its backyard.

Last Friday, June 28, KOCO hosted a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the project as students and guests toured the new garden and admired over 100 student works of art.

According to the state's website, the 2024 Connecticut Grown for Connecticut Kids grant is a statewide program designed to establish and enhance Farm-to-School initiatives across Connecticut schools. Executive director of KOCO, Janet Santos, originally applied for the grant but was denied as she underestimated the cost needed to create the garden and associated curriculum. She explained that with the help of Eric Francis, the CEO of Trifecta Ecosystems and a KOCO parent, they were able to make the garden a reality. Francis and his team helped write the grant, design the project and build the on-site garden.

As part of Trifecta Ecosystems, Francis shared that Farm2X designs, builds and implements comprehensive farm-to-school projects that aim to bring locally grown, healthy foods into classrooms, integrating food, agriculture, and STEAM education into the curriculum.

The highlight of the project is the creation of a food garden at KOCO, which will offer a sustainable supply of fruits and vegetables for the students. In the garden, there are apple trees, blueberry and blackberry bushes, pollinators, herbs, tomatoes, strawberries and much more. Francis said his team will help maintain the garden and teach the students how to close it over the winter to ensure growth in the following seasons.

"It's about the experience, curiosity and exploration. They get to learn about what grows in their backyard and locally," described Francis. Students will be able to interact with the plants and see what local food is and what it tastes like.

Now that the garden is officially open, Santos said the students will be responsible for the garden care, including weeding, watering and harvesting. With help from the teacher-facilitators, the students will also create garden plans for subsequent years, deciding which plants to continue growing and which to swap out, including the annuals. Santos also explained the lessons about the value of water. Since KOCO operates on well water, the irrigation system will include a set of rain barrels.

The garden has a perimeter of plants with student-created decor, including stepping stones and friendship rocks. For her middle school capstone project, KOCO alumna Ellie White worked with the preschoolers to create signage for some plants. In the center, there are concrete gardening boxes and a bench built by Torrison Stone and Garden out of Durham that partnered with Trifecta Ecosystems. Many of the herbs and vegetables are planted off the ground in the raised beds.

In addition to the on-site garden, Santos explained their new farm-to-school partnership with Cold Spring Farm in Colchester. Under the grant, KOCO will receive monthly deliveries from the farm of added-value products, such as jams and jellies, and fresh produce to taste test. Santos added that another KOCO parent, Lindsey Gomes, is a dietitian with Shop-Rite. Gomes will be supporting the students as they develop healthy recipes using the produce they grow and receive by providing supplementary tools, materials and curriculum.

The grant "Local Flavors: A Journey Through Connecticut's Farms at KOCO for Kids" brought Trifecta Ecosystems to the childcare center to design, build and maintain a garden. Filled with a variety of fruits, vegetables and herbs, the students at KOCO will be able to pick their own produce and learn more about local offerings.

The last component of the grant will support student field trips to local farms. In August, KOCO will take the school-aged summer campers to Lyman Orchard in Middlefield to pick pieces and nectarines and visit the sunflower maze. When they return from the trip, they hope to create peach salsa with the ingredients they picked at the farm and from the garden.

KOCO was established in 1988 and cares for children between the ages of eight weeks to 12 years throughout the year, explained Santos. In addition to daycare for children under the age of three, the business offers a readiness program for preschool and kindergarten, before and after-school care and summer camps for the school-aged kids. The newer facility, located at 12 Long Crossing Rd., was designed and built from 2018-19. With 11 classrooms and direct access to outside playgrounds, there is also a built-in splash pad.

Santos said KOCO actively makes upgrades with technology including classroom laptops and tablets, televisions, a 3D printer, microscopes, a sewing machine and more. "Though, our curriculum is not overly focused on technology," Santos said. "We believe in the value of meaningful, authentic, hands-on experiences." Which, she added, is "a key reason that KOCO initiated this garden project."