

BYP-led garden helps youth to “grow”

Since the end of June, under the guidance of KEYS AmeriCorps members, more than 20 youth have been working at the Braddock Youth Project (BYP) to learn gardening and life skills.

The Gardening and Healthy Practices Module, part of the Learn and Earn summer employment program, offers paid employment experience to youth ages 14 to 18. It is one module of the BYP program which serves 90 - 100 teens during the summer in Braddock and Wilkinsburg.

Program participants work with produce from seed to plate, tending to four community gardens around Braddock, harvesting the produce and creating a healthy meal with their spoils. Ben Blatt, a former chef, works with the youth to teach food safety, cooking techniques and how to make healthier versions of favorite foods.

“At the start of the program, there will be youth who had never seen a head of cauliflower and many are scared to give it a try,” Ben said. “We have a ‘one bite’ rule, where everyone must have a least one bite of everything we make; you can’t dislike something if you’ve never tasted it. As the summer progresses, you can see their confidence growing and their tastes expanding. It’s my hope that exposure to new, fresh ingredients will spark a future interest in cooking and healthy life choices.”

In addition to working in the garden, participants are also exposed to masonry, woodwork and other physical tasks.

“Some of our female participants have never been encouraged to use tools, and some of our male participants have never been encouraged to cook,” said Leslie Stem, gardening coordinator for the program. “Regardless of whether they decide on careers as farmers or chefs, everything they learn in this program is something they can take with them as they begin to live independently.”

The program has a tremendous benefit for the community as well: Many of the areas where gardens currently grow were previously abandoned properties. The BYP Gardening and Healthy Practices Module youth work to not only grow aesthetically pleasing flowers, herbs and produce, but also design decorative fencing and signage to surround the gardens.

“Gardening is one of the more challenging summer learning experiences, but we’re always pleased to see the impact it has on our youth and the community as a whole. This experience is life-enhancing for everyone who comes in contact with it,” Leslie concluded.