



Contributed by Kate Callahan

Andre Caldwell, left, and Tina Zorzi, both members of the Squash Squad gives Sally Pappenheimer, center, master of the Willimantic Farmers Market, a tour of the community garden at Willimantic's Lauter Park during a garden party on Saturday.

Garden party evokes a sense of community

By **ALYSSA RAMETTA**
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WINDHAM/WILLIMANTIC — Community, to some, is simply a group of people who reside near one another and nothing more.

But to Sally Milius, director of GROW Windham, the definition of community can be seen at the community garden located in Willimantic's Lauter Park.

"The collaboration in this community is really special," she said. "That's community — working together with everyone is what makes it a community project."

Through collaborations and volunteers, the community garden grows

vegetables to donate to the Covenant Soup Kitchen and Willimantic Food Co-op, as well as selling the leftovers at the Willimantic Farmers Market.

Windham Area Interfaith Ministry (WAIM) volunteer Andy Ames said GROW Windham donated an estimated 800 pounds of vegetables to the soup kitchen just this year.

On Saturday afternoon, the garden celebrated its sense of community with the Windham community at a "garden party," intended to celebrate its successful growth over the summer.

More than 40 garden volunteers, program volunteers and community members visited the garden to celebrate its

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growth over the summer.

Hosted by both GROW Windham and WAIM, the celebration was a success, according to CT Food Justice Youth Core VISTA member James Boyle.

"This summer was a really big period of growth for us in a lot of different aspects," said Boyle. "The shed was built from the ground up and the Squash Squad worked all summer at the Willimantic Farmers Market and kept up the garden.

"It's a celebration of all of this," he said, regarding the garden party.

Boyle also made note of all of the "generous" donations made to the party from various community organizations.

Food and desserts were donated by the Willimantic Food Co-op, Cinco de Mayo and A Cupcake for Later, as well as various veg-

etables from various farmers market vendors.

Along with the donated snacks, visitors took a tour of the garden guided by the Squash Squad and participated in a vegetable swap.

The Squash Squad, the Windham Youth CORE, is a year-round high school program sponsored by the collaboration between GROW Windham, EastConn and Windham Public Schools.

"They started the whole idea of making leaders out of youth," said Boyle on the members of the Squash Squad.

Ana Sergis, a junior at Coventry High School, said she got involved with the youth program because of her interest in nutrition.

"I've met a lot of good friends through the program," she said while standing beside her two new friends, Danielle Vasquez and Angela Vega, fellow members of the Squash Squad.

"It's been a really good experi-

ence so far," said Vasquez, who is currently involved in the program for a second year as a junior at Windham Technical High School.

For Vega, also a junior at Windham Tech, the best part about participating in the program is "meeting all the new people."

The Squash Squad set up a stand at the town's farmers market and committed to being at its stand at 7:30 a.m. every Saturday, even during the school year.

"It's a dream come true to have the Squash Squad at the farmers market," said Willimantic Farmers Market Master Sally Pappenheimer with a smile. "They truly enjoy going to the market."

Kate Callahan, the FoodCorps service member at GROW Windham, had nothing but good things to say about the "wonderful young people."

"Working with the kids has been absolutely incredible, they're very motivated and dedicated," she

said.

While the kids were getting involved in the garden and at the farmers market, local contractors, carpenters and volunteers (many from Eastern Connecticut State University) worked to build a tool shed from the ground up this summer.

The garden party Saturday celebrated the shed being built and all that it represents.

"The shed represents all of the people gathering and also represents the way the whole community has come together to build it," said Milius, calling the Windham community "special."

Callahan agreed, saying the community support is what makes the programs possible at GROW Windham.

"There are not a lot of monetary resources here, but the community resources and the ability for everyone to support each other is there," she said.