

Bloom where you're planted

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Refugee Ma Than prepares carrots for sale at the farmers market

KANSAS CITY, Kan. — Sitting on a rug on the floor of his classroom, three-year-old Caleb chattered away to his new best friend — Archbishop Joseph F. Naumann.

The archbishop had pulled up a chair next to Caleb in the children's circle at St. Benedict's Early Education Center in Kansas City, Kan.

The June 27 visit was one stop on the archbishop's tour to experience — on a very personal level — the work of Catholic Charities in action.

“Catholic Charities is really the place where the church is outward in its mission, serving others,” said Jan Lewis, president and CEO of Catholic Charities of Northeast Kansas. “This was an opportunity for the archbishop to see the church in action, to see where our faith meets our brothers and sisters in need.”

Planting a seed

June 27 dawned to stormy skies.

But the early downpour didn't dampen the enthusiasm at the Juniper Gardens Farm in Kansas City, Kan.

There, the first stop of the archbishop's tour, women gathered their best vegetables from their plots of land and got them ready to sell.

The women — refugees all — were farming a plot of land that is changing their lives, lives that had been marked by homelands rife with persecution and conflict.

Now, through Catholic Charities' New Roots for Refugees program, they are putting down new roots in Kansas City, Kan., the seeds of independence in their very own hands.

Lewis gave Archbishop Naumann a tour of the fields being farmed, accompanied by Rachel Pollock, the New Roots for Refugees program coordinator.

The program grew out of an idea that refugee women proposed in 2005. They wanted to contribute to their families' finances through small-scale farming, a skill many of them already possessed.

Catholic Charities worked with Cultivate Kansas City to develop such a program and, using land secured from the Kansas City, Kan., Housing Authority, broke ground on the Juniper Gardens Farm.

The farm features 17 plots of land. Sunflowers line the fence, and inside you'll find everything from carrots and cucumbers to produce that is new to many palates, like kohlrabi or garlic scapes — a green, twisting part of the garlic plant that finds its way onto menus at fine restaurants.

The produce is then sold on Mondays at a market in the lot next to the farm.

Many walk to the market, which gives people who live nearby access to fresh foods they might not otherwise have. One program that benefits people locally is the Beans and Greens initiative. It doubles the amount people can buy when they use food stamps at the market.

People also come from farther away — especially those who seek vegetables native to their homelands.

"They come from all over to buy it," Pollock said. "That's one thing they're most excited about: growing food for their own culture."

The farmers take part in a community-supported agriculture program, which means "share owners" pay a set fee and receive a regular share of vegetables. This guarantees some consistent income for the farmers. It also introduces share owners — including Lewis — to new tastes, such as roasted turnips and beets.

New Roots for Refugees brought in \$60,000 in 2010. Pollock hopes to exceed that this year. Proceeds help refugees support their families and build up funds to continue farming on their own land as graduates of the program.

The women also build skills and confidence. They learn about consumer analysis, business plans, banking and reinvesting proceeds into business growth.

Pollock knows each woman well.

Pay Lay came from Burma.

"She's been in the garden for four years," Pollock said. "She has beautiful vegetables."

"They're beautifully presented," observed Archbishop Naumann.

Lay has been in the United States since 2006. Some of her seven children are grown; the youngest is five.

Ray Nay Paw is in her second year in the garden. She sells vegetables at a farmers' market in Overland Park.

"She sells a lot of vegetables," Pollock said.

Pelagie Mukarwigemera smiled as she trimmed some turnip plants. She sells her vegetables at still another farmers' market.

The program is thriving, Pollock said.

"The participants really love what they're doing," she added.

"It's helping people become independent utilizing their skills," said Archbishop Naumann, who concluded his visit by buying vegetables from each refugee farmer.

"What a bargain," he said, after buying \$6 worth of broccoli, carrots and potatoes at one of the stands.

Growing as a couple

Just as vegetables need care to thrive, so do marriages.

Archbishop Naumann's next visit was with Christina Sell, program manager for Marriage for Keeps.

This program helps couples maintain happy marriages, raise happier children and build stronger families.

The program's marriage enrichment workshops take place in group settings, using the "Within Our Reach" curriculum.

"Every component that we offer is offered in both Spanish and English," Sell told the archbishop. And 75 percent of the participants are Catholic couples.

When he asked how long the couples have been married, Sell said that some are newlyweds, but some are "pushing 70." Many come because they want to mentor other couples.

Archbishop Naumann also met with Mike Duxler, project director of the Catholic Charities Marriage for Keeps program.

"I'm just grateful that you're helping couples," he told Sell and Duxler. "Marriage is the foundation of the family."

Raising a family

Family is a big piece of the puzzle at St. Benedict's Early Education Center in Kansas City, Kan. From movie nights to regular conferences, there are always ways for parents to take part in their children's progress.

"If you can get the parents involved, it will help [the children] succeed in school," center director Kasie Garlington explained to Archbishop Naumann.

The center serves children in Wyandotte County whose families have substantial financial needs. It aims to give children care, support and strong foundations in education, to break the cycle of poverty.

"They know we have their children's best interest at heart," Garlington said.

On his tour of the facility, Archbishop Naumann visited several classrooms. In one, a woman rocked a baby.

In another, the archbishop talked with a boy about his progress on a puzzle and watched a frenzy of accessory trading at a table covered with Polly Pocket toys.

The center focuses on the social and emotional well-being of the children, who range in age from two weeks to 12 years. About 60 children come each day to St. Benedict's.

And it has phenomenal teachers, Garlington said. They, in turn, very much appreciated a visit from the guy at the top.

"It means a lot to show he cares so much about our program, what we're doing here, to come visit our facility," Garlington said.

One thing that sets the center apart from many others is its teen parent program, she said.

Training includes everything from how to be a good parent to setting goals to establishing a "second virginity." Even young women who have had a child, she explained further, can learn to see their bodies as sacred.

The center also fills an important role within the larger community. It has built a relationship

with its neighbors. It has opened its doors for education on gang issues. It partners with Communities in Schools, which led to a Latin dance class last year, and soon will be yielding opportunities for area children to garden.

The kids aren't always going to be within these walls, explained Garlington, so it's important to foster good relationships to keep them safe and thriving anywhere they go.

And the kids love coming here. Garlington tells parents to expect little ones to cry when they arrive at first — but says to give her a week to a month. By then, the tears will come when it's time to leave. She's seen that come true time and time again.

Projects, artwork and photographs cover the walls of the center, a clear sign of how proud everyone is of their young stars.

Words like "perseverance," "compassion" and "responsibility" also decorate the walls. They're qualities the center hopes to instill in each child.

"Thanks for what you're doing," Archbishop Naumann told Garlington. "It's impressive."

After his tour of St. Benedict's, he made one more stop — just a stone's throw from center — to another part of the Catholic family. He delivered the fresh vegetables he'd bought from the refugee farmers to the Little Sisters of the Lamb.

Archbishop Naumann also had dinner at Shalom House in Kansas City, Kan., Catholic Charities' emergency shelter for men. He was able to interact with some of the men staying there, as well as with volunteers who come in to serve dinner.

"My goal is just to let [the archbishop] get out on the perimeter of where the church really is," Lewis said.

In her opinion, one can't help but fall in love with the people and the programs.