

Garden thrives at homeless shelter

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About 75 volunteers helped spruce up the Institute for Human Services men's and women's shelters in Iwilei yesterday, planting gardens as part of the organization's urban farming initiative. Volunteer Kendra Neipp helped Autumn Ingalls, 2, left, and Gwyneth Landau, 7, plant beets.

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At the women's shelter on Kaaahi Street, volunteers added fruits and vegetables to the landscaping as part of the organization's urban farming initiative.

IHS serves 700 meals a day and the garden will supplement the meals, said Connie Mitchell, the institute's executive director.

Organizing the garden was Hunter Heavilin, an instructor at the Green House, a private company that has a state grant to teach kids at the shelter about sustainable living.

He carefully organized the 1,000 square feet of earth between the sidewalk and the building, creating a miniecosystem with smaller plants beneath larger plants, like the green beans at the feet of 8-foot-tall stalks of corn in front of a row of squash. He had volunteers plant ong choy, watercress and comfrey -- all thirsty plants -- under a wall of growing herbs where the water drains off.

"We're really trying to maximize our yield, while being aware of the stress on the land," Heavilin said.

And a small barrier to protect the garden from the walkway was made of branches from the invasive strawberry guava tree.

"It is a good atmosphere to have something in front of a building," said Joann Robello, a resident of the shelter for about three months. "It has become really nice to know that we can do things like this even in the city."

A homeless shelter has become a garden in the city.

Community members planted malabar spinach, papaya trees, grape tomatoes, banana trees, corn, Okinawan and regular sweet potatoes, and various herbs yesterday as the Institute for Human Services celebrated its Founder's Day. The event drew about 75 volunteers from the shelter and community to spruce up the men's and women's shelters in Iwilei.

The special day honored the Rev. Claude Du Teil, the late IHS founder, who opened a drop-in center in Chinatown in 1978 after fighting his own battles against mental illness and alcoholism.

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She said people passing by always comment on the garden, which has been growing corn planted by the shelter's children for several weeks.

Kate Bepko, IHS spokeswoman, said the urban garden initiative follows in the footsteps of the founder, who believed in making use of available resources.

"It's using something that's not very useful to create a product that we need," she said. "In the spirit of Father Claude, we decided to plant our own food."

The garden is one of several sustainable projects the shelter is working on.

On the roof of the Kaaahi Street building, the IHS staff is building an aquaponics and hydroponics garden about 540 square feet in size. An aquaponic system circulates fish water to fertilize plants, while a hydroponic garden grows plants without soil.

"The hope is really to inspire other people to do the same thing," Bepko said.

Volunteers yesterday also painted the institute's hallway, rearranged the food pantry, and added fruit trees to the Kaaahi street entrance, fronting a gas station.

"It was really fulfilling," said Nicole Van Noy, 16, who was initially skeptical about getting up early on a Saturday to volunteer with her friends. "You're doing something that is going to grow and help other people."

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