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In Our Own Backyard: Olivewood Gardens

By *Sharon Asakawa*



I had heard that John Walton (the son of Sam Walton, founder of Walmart) had moved his family into a Victorian-style home in National City, California in the 1980s. National City is only a 5-minute drive from where my husband Bruce and I live, and it seemed inconceivable that the 11th richest man in the world would choose to live with his family in such an unpretentious community. But perhaps that was the appeal for this private and modest family.

When their son Lukas was diagnosed with cancer, in addition to the standard medical treatment, the family decided to also look into alternative options including changing his diet to organic foods. Christy began growing all of Lukas' vegetables in her garden. Surviving cancer Lukas has grown up to be a healthy young man.



After John's untimely death in a plane accident, Christy continued her husband's legacy of philanthropy by supporting worthy causes including the donation of her historic National City home on almost 7 acres of land to the International Community Foundation-Center for Cross-Border Philanthropy in 2006. The foundation funds projects in Mexico, but the endowment also included a request that the lower gardens, which she planted with organic vegetables and fruits for Lukas, be maintained.

From that seed, the Olivewood Gardens and Learning Center germinated and took root. Under the enthusiastic and committed leadership of executive director Amy Carstensen, 2,500 school children from primarily the National City School District visited in

its first year of operation in 2010. Through the efforts of volunteer chefs, school children were invited to help garden, harvest and prepare their meals.



Just one year later, my husband and I were invited to visit Olivewood and we were impressed to discover not only the wonderful gardens, but also how the center involves the surrounding urban community to explore the connections between plants and history, science, art, literature, math and nutrition. Because the garden grows its own fruits and vegetables, the center can offer nutrition classes, cooking demonstrations and community workshops to the local children and their families.

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