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Guest Speaker: A Garden, Empowering a Community

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Olivewood Gardens and Learning Center in San Diego County connects and motivates students and families through organic gardening, environmental stewardship, nutrition education and cooking.

By Candy Wallace

I live in San Diego County, one of the most beautiful areas in the United States. Perched north of the U.S. border with Mexico, my

county has 70 miles of coastline and a landscape of rolling hills against a backdrop of mesas and small canyons. We enjoy a mild, Mediterranean-like climate where tall palm trees thrive. As the second-most-populous county in California, to many residents, to live here is to live in Paradise.

Yet in National City, squeezed between its giant neighbors San Diego and Chula Vista and with a population of about 60,000, huge need exists. According to California Border Kids Count, in 2007, 34% of National City's children and youth lived in poverty. Eighty-five percent of students in the school district qualify for free or reduced lunch. The community has one of the highest childhood-obesity rates in California, with a rate of diabetes hospitalization and mortality more than double the county average. Fast-food culture dominates, and options for purchasing affordable, locally produced, high-quality fresh food are limited.

That's why the Olivewood Gardens and Learning Center is so important. Founded in February 2010, Olivewood's mission is to connect and motivate students and families from diverse backgrounds through organic gardening, environmental stewardship and nutrition education, empowering them to be healthy and active citizens. Its vision is to reconnect students and families to the natural environment through food, education and community engagement.

Olivewood's 6.85-acre property serves as an interactive, indoor-outdoor classroom for San Diego County's 3 million rural, urban and suburban residents. It's one of the few school-garden programs in the nation that emphasizes food preparation along with garden cultivation, teaching children and adults how to grow, cook and enjoy tasty, healthy whole foods.

It does this with funding from such entities as the San Diego Restaurant Association, American Express and Kaiser Permanente. But Olivewood could never exist without its army of dedicated volunteers, including chefs and food professionals who donate their time to teach hands-on cooking classes, and master gardeners, scientists and educators who serve as field instructors, leading lessons in the colorful demonstration garden. The more than 5,500 hours contributed so far by nearly 1,000 volunteers has enabled Olivewood Gardens to extend its programming to greater numbers of children despite the small staff.

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Improving Children's Dietary Behaviors

Olivewood's core program offers visiting schoolchildren a synergistic curriculum of ecological, academic and culinary lessons to build scientific literacy and environmental awareness, while encouraging students and visitors to explore the interrelationships of a quality diet, sustainable agriculture and healthy living. Through garden-based education, its programs inspire children to explore connections between plants and the natural world and the disciplines of history, science, art, literature, math, geography and nutrition. Its environmental-education program adds hands-on, inquiry-based workshops in sustainable agriculture, water conservation, recycling and composting.

In 2010-11, Olivewood welcomed third-, fourth- and fifth-grade students from three partner National City elementary schools. Its goal is to expand that number to four schools in 2011-12, eventually serving all 10 National City elementary schools by 2015.

Participating classrooms visit Olivewood four times a year, giving students the chance to observe the garden's different growing seasons as they move through the calendar year. During each visit, students rotate through three sessions—a gardening activity, nutrition activity and cooking activity—that engage them in the full cycle of cultivating, preparing and eating fresh produce from the garden.

In the garden, students undertake a grade-appropriate sequence of standards-based science and nutrition lessons. Back in Olivewood's intimate demonstration kitchen, spellbound kids receive cooking lessons from uniformed chefs and participate in hands-on culinary alchemy. Age-appropriate, easy, wholesome recipes feature seasonal produce from the garden. Students are encouraged to explore the food they sample with all their senses, and to adjust seasonings to their liking. This increases their enjoyment of and knowledge about healthy foods.

"It's a moving experience to help elementary-school kids who have never dug a trowel into the earth to plant a seed or crack open and beat an egg learn these skills—and then also enjoy the dishes they create, trying fresh vegetables and other ingredients that may be totally foreign to them—and then falling in love with their flavors," says Caron Golden, an award-winning food writer based in San Diego and an avid volunteer at Olivewood Gardens.

In addition to its core school program, Olivewood offers gardening classes, field trips, weekly tours and weekend family days along with meetings and luncheons for health- and sustainability-related companies and organizations. It also is one of five regional sites where San Diego County residents can take free classes to learn how to convert lawns, yards and small spaces into fruit and vegetable gardens. Other classes help residents start or maintain school and community gardens.

Experiential nutrition-education programs that include exposing kids to a variety of foods, along with hands-on activities such as cooking, are becoming recognized as important contributors to improving children's dietary behaviors. Such experiences could significantly increase children's knowledge of, preference for and consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables, even into adulthood. By practicing positive nutritional choices over the long term, local children and community members may reduce their risk of chronic diseases associated with obesity including diabetes, cancer and heart disease.

That's why Olivewood Gardens is so critical to San Diego County—and beyond. And it's why an in-depth tour of the gardens and facility is on the agenda of the 2012 APPCA Personal Chef Summit in San Diego, February 10-12. Personal chefs, like other culinary professionals, endeavor to give back by making their communities a better and healthier place to live. Olivewood Gardens is doing just that for a growing number of children and adults in need.

For more information on Olivewood Gardens, visit www.olivewoodgardens.org.

Candy Wallace is founder and executive director of the American Personal & Private Chef Association based in San Diego and an enthusiastic volunteer chef at Olivewood Gardens and Learning Center. For more information, visit www.personalchef.com.

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