

# Providing extra helpings of knowledge

12:01 a.m. Sept. 10, 2014

Olivewood Gardens (2013-14 fiscal year)

- Student visits: 3,750
- Students served: 1,755
- Community visits: 3,488
- Volunteers: 528
- Volunteer hours: 6,640
- Adults/parents trained: 27

Address: 2525 N. Ave., National City.

NATIONAL CITY — The story of how Olivewood Gardens and Learning Center, a near 7-acre food education site, came to life begins with the story of Lukas Walton.

When Christy and John Walton moved into their Victorian home on N Avenue in the 1980s, their son Lukas was 2. As a child, he was diagnosed with cancer, and it began to spread.

The Waltons became desperate to find treatments. Eventually, they turned to their organic fruit and vegetable garden to put Lukas on a juice diet. Soon after, the cancer stopped spreading.

Today, Lukas is a healthy adult and cancer free. He has even founded his own business called Education Agriculture and Technology, or E.A.T.

After her husband died, Christy donated the home and surrounding 6.85 acres in 2006 to the International Community Foundation, a charitable organization that funds projects in Mexico.

The house, gardens and property were gifted to Olivewood Gardens in 2010 with the condition that the gardens be maintained and property used to benefit the community.

It has since become an oasis for families in National City.

Hands-on gardening and cooking classes for local elementary students and families from underserved communities encourage children and adults to lead healthy, active lives through nature and food.

Third-, fourth- and fifth-graders from the National School District visit Olivewood three times a year.

All parents and children are asked to take a pledge when they come to Olivewood: “I promise, always and everywhere, to take one big bite of everything before I say no thank you and I really, really, really mean it.”

“Our ultimate goal at Olivewood Gardens is to serve the community in terms of improving their health and knowledge of the environment and making the connection between a healthy body and environment,” said Executive Director Healy Vigderson.

National City residents she said are in particular need of education since they have one of the highest obesity and type two diabetes rates in the county and live in a low-income community.

“Long term, we want to see National City get healthier and become a model for other communities to make healthy choices,” Vigderson said.

Olivewood uses volunteer chefs and food professionals, master gardeners, scientists, college students and educators for classes, field trips, tours and community events. Since the first field trip in 2010, the center has hosted more than 38,000 visits.

“We’re here to contribute to their health and happiness,” said Program Director Diana Bergman. “It’s a way of giving back to the community.”

Cooking for Salud! is a seven-week program offered twice a year that focuses on teaching families how to change their daily eating habits.

Throughout the course, “kitchenistas” and “kitchenistos,” as they’re dubbed, are taught a new aspect of healthy eating.

Urban Solace Restaurant chef and owner Matt Gordon recently taught the class about meats and meat alternatives.

Most importantly, they learned that meat should be part of a meal but not the main dish.

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