

Knowlton Academy to build school garden

Helping the children to grow, a concept eagerly embraced by the wide community

By Ann Davidson

The ETSB is on board, the town is on board, and the community is abuzz while it embraces a dynamic garden project at Knowlton Academy in TBL that was seeded in mid-July and is growing in leaps and bounds. The three-phase design is on paper, and the school community is hoping to make headway before the snow falls.

It's a dream that Shelley Mizener has had for almost ten years, a concept that she has been pitching with few grasping the somewhat nebulous and leggy master plan. However, through this concrete garden plan that was seeded in mid-July and is sprouting like a Jack-in-the-Beanstalk bean, Mizener has been able to demonstrate the merits of the process within her master plans. She claims that it has been a totally organic happening with natural connections.

The project will be developed in three stages with building a greenhouse first, then readying the gardens, and eventually planting fruit and non-allergenic nuts. The school is on a large enough property to accommodate the plan. The organizers are counting on it to root the notion of stewardship while strengthening community and social development and facilitating healthy lifestyles that feed academic achievement. It is also a good fit for training young people skills that they can take to employment in a region that relies on agro-tourism.

"It all started when Richard Gagnon dropped into Foster Gardens, where I am working," Mizener said. "He told me that he is planning his retirement and wants to set up a greenhouse. I said why not at the school where the kids and the community can profit too. It's a big extension to what the owners of Foster Gardens, Rémi and Alexia Lamontagne have been doing." According to Mizener, the couple has been inviting students from the local schools to visit their greenhouses for many years. Mizener

grabbed Gagnon in an instant. A plan developed, Mizener made a couple of calls to people who might be interested, and from there it just mushroomed. The plan was presented to the governing board, which barely blinked before sanctioning it. Principle Renalee Gore made it clear that they could use the property. Gore says that she and her staff cannot be responsible for organizing infrastructure, but is amenable for the group to use the school name and property.

Gagnon, elated about the outcome, said, "For the school to go forward with a project like this, its governing board must sanction it. They did not hesitate. They just loved it – everyone – it was unanimous. It was Mizener and Jennifer Ruggins-Muir who came with me to present it and they were amazing. Since then so many others have committed, including Stephanie Marks."

Gagnon is a commissioner for the ETSB and says that this project fits well into the ETSB culture. Massey-Vanier has just hired a teacher for an agricultural course and already there are 28 students signed up for it while both Sutton Elementary and Heroes' Memorial School in Cowansville have gardens. He sees the KA Garden project as one that teaches sustainability.

"In this world where housing, food, and water are becoming a premium with shortages mounting, it is important to teach the kids to take the edge off. By learning to grow their own, they will." Gagnon also wants them to know the importance of growing bounty that is natural and not laced with GMOs or chemicals. The program that KA Gardens is offering will be incorporated in all the classes. "We are hoping that it will serve as a model and that it will be shaped for Massey-Vanier students as well. And it should complement the new agricultural class at the high school and it is a viable model that is transferrable across the country."

"In order to get the kids to stay in

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STEPHEN THOMPSON

Stephanie Marks and Shelley Mizener were at Townshippers' Day pitching the new KA Garden project that, gaining momentum and velocity, a project and learning model that includes the wide community, a model that is transferrable to any school across the country.

school there must be something that interests them," he says. "There is art, music, sports, cooking, and now there will be gardening. ... We want to give students a reason to stay in school. We want the students to build a sense of worth. This project is almost like a magical bullet. The school board endorses the notion of 'Attachment Theory.' Whether it is a teacher or a volunteer all it takes is a subject that interests the student and one person that will have a lasting impact on the student's confidence. It gives the student a safe place to go to if it is

needed.

Mizener explains that it's about capacity building, drawing on the resources in the community, and giving back to them. It's about building a network, strengthening relationships within for the sake of sustainability.

Chef and mother of three and 100-mile foodie Jennifer Ruggins-Muir says that Mizener invited her to get involved. Ruggins is making a point of feeding her brood with produce that is obtainable within a 100-mile radius. Already

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involved in the school's bistro program, she wants to do a "bounty to table" class that would eventually expand to all students in the school and include a component about nutrition.

Marks, who has lived in Mexico and seen how healthy it is for intergenerational exchange, rather than letting seniors become isolated in segregated facilities. She has eagerly jumped in by making sure there is lots of data to substantiate the benefits of a program. On one of her documents she cites a motto: "A community that sows together, grows together"...and that is what this plan is ultimately all about from Mizener's perspectives. It's about sustainability in the community and a lot more. They want the children to learn how to grow edible products so that they can provide for themselves and their families. But it is

even bigger than that. It's about developing healthy relationships. Everyone has a place in this project. Each person brings a special skill or personal contribution.

The three-phase plan is not simply building a lab for a program that will fit into the curriculum, it is uniting all the players in the community. Marks spoke about the many ways to connect learning to gardening — from developing reading and writing skills, science and social, and math.

Mizener says that already restaurants are saying that they will take produce and mention on their menus that they are supporting the KA Garden project. She sees how the students can help to create a heritage garden by the PHK House on the campus of the Brome County Historical Society. Already elec-

tricians, construction people, architects have given a hand. Susan Muir, an architectural designer has drafted the layout of the plan. West Bolton resident Barry Dwyer is building a website that will soon be available to browsers (www.kagardens.ca) and a student in adult education in Cowansville has offered to undertake accounting and administrative duties. Someone is even ready to set up security cameras. And there is a buzz about fundraising activities being organized. Already they are looking to connect the program with the TBL Community Services' Salamander Summer Camp.

"We want the frame for the greenhouse up before the snow flies," Mizener said. The land is there, the hydro is connected and the water is available for later. A recent quote of \$15,000 for the

greenhouse without taking into consideration a special discount for schools seems to be a doable cost.

While Gagnon strongly supports the program and is engaged in the process he credits the genius behind the energy of Mizener, Ruggins-Muir, and Marks. He raves about their creativity, the resources that they are adding to the team so that this plan will be in operation by the spring. Looking at the side of the school that overlooks the site where there will be the greenhouse and gardens, the ladies are excited that its southern exposure is perfect for students to start seeds in their classrooms "And the wide window sills are perfect for holding lots of them."