Councilwoman Kepert Goes to North Bellport, Where Community Gardens are Blossoming

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Councilwoman Kepert, joined by community garden supporters, among them, Tony Gazzola, Farther John Mellitt, Betty and Steve Gundlach

at the Garden Blessing of the Community Garden at St. Joseph the Worker.

Councilwoman Kepert at the Chris Hobson and Bill Neal Memorial Garden along with Program Director from Suffolk County United Veteran Halfway House Project in Yaphank Joanne Massimo, Volunteer from Local 7 Carpenters Union Mark Massimo and Community Gardens Coordinator Department of Family Medicine Stony Brook University Iman Marghoob.
Farmingville, NY - On Saturday, April 30, Councilwoman Connie Kepert spent her Saturday morning in North Bellport visiting friends at two community gardens, one established garden at St. Joseph the Worker run by Betty and Steve Gundlach and one just being built on the corner of McDonald and Patchogue Avenues. "It's truly wonderful to see these community gardens in North Bellport. Not only will they provide access to nutritionally rich, fresh vegetables that may otherwise not be accessible to many families in the community, but they increase the sense of community for the residents who are drawn to the garden where they connect and learn gardening skills from each other. It's positive on so many levels," stated Councilwoman Kepert.

Councilwoman Kepert's was instrumental in the success of both gardens. Ms. Kepert awarded nearly $10,000 from the Quality King fund that was set aside for the implementation of the Greater Bellport Sustainable Community Plan. In 2009, with the vision of Betty and Steve Gundlach the community garden at St. Joseph the Worker began to grow to what now includes raised garden beds that form a labyrinth as well as a pergola that provides an attractive entrance for the garden. The garden is a lively place that connects people to their neighbors and nature.

The idea for the new community garden, located on the northwest corner of MacDonald Avenue and Patchogue Avenue, was brought to the attention of Councilwoman Kepert in January, "The community approached me with a desire to build a community garden, they already had a grant in place through Stony Brook University, all they needed was a location easily accessible to the community with lots of sunlight. I was excited about this since I always envisioned community gardens throughout the residential neighborhood in North Bellport to provide access to free healthy food for the community and to bring neighbors together. We found an ideal plot and coordinated with our Planning Department to develop a site plan for the garden and our Parks Department to help with the installation of the fence and the water hook-up. I was also able to allocate Quality King funds for the project to the tune of $9,000. It's these types of projects that make my job satisfying and I have confidence that the garden will be a success," stated Councilwoman Kepert.

The new garden will be a memorial garden, named after two local men who are missed by the community, Chris Hobson and Bill Neal, has also been funded by a New York State Department of Health grant from the Healthy Heart Program awarded to the Nutrition Division at the Department of Family Medicine at Stony Brook. The garden, consisting of twenty plots, mostly 10 X 20, will be under the ownership of 20 families who will take a survey indicating information on their diet prior to participating in the community garden. Once the growing season is over the families will take the survey again to determine if their diets have improved as a result of their access to the fresh vegetables. The garden will also provide two handicap accessible plots. John Rogers, the Chair of the Greater Bellport Coalition, was assisting with building the plots on Saturday stated, "This is a great project because it will help to unify the community and bring folks together."

The gardens also move the spirits of the gardeners. Khadija Yanni who worked on the Chris Hobson and Bill Neal Memorial Garden was reminded of George Bernard Shaw, The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God, 1932 when she quoted him, "The best place to seek God is in a garden. You can dig for him there." Betty Gundlach, who sees the garden as a place to bring about peace, stated, "Words of peace in different languages were added to the peace pole for this year's garden blessing. The word can't be repeated often enough. Peace is law and order and freedom from quarrels. It is calm, quiet and tranquil. Peace takes hard work and nurturing so let there be peace on earth and let it begin in the garden."

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