

# Islip News

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## Community spirit deep rooted in Mercy Haven Garden

More than 100 community members gathered to celebrate the opening of Mercy Haven's new Community Garden in Brentwood. The "Growing Together" Community Garden reflected community spirit in every sense, taking shape through the united efforts of more than a dozen community groups, and offering shade and fresh vegetables to both residents and neighbors of Mercy Haven homes throughout Long Island.

The Garden is located in Brentwood at Mercy Enrichment, a community gathering space and place of respite operated by Mercy Haven, a nonprofit agency that provides housing and services to Long Islanders who are homeless, living with mental illness, or living in poverty.

Mercy Haven's Executive Director, Sister Patricia Griffith, said she had long held the dream of such a garden for the benefit of Mercy Haven's residents and the community. "I believe we can learn so much from Mother Earth," said Sister Pat to the festive, gathered crowd. "She reveals so much to us, and in this interaction between earth and human, we find our commonness and mutual healing. No one can rush the experience of a garden growing—we are asked to wait, to take care, to water, to interact, notice and pay attention. In this frenzied world of ours—isn't that a great gift?"

Many community groups came

together to fill the garden's 16 raised beds, including PRONTO of Long Island, the Unity Project, Mercy First, Boy Scout Troop 25 & Crew 25, Brentwood High School, St. Anne's Parish Outreach, St. Anne's Gardens, SEPA Mujer, and several groups of Mercy Haven residents. The Garden was created in partnership with Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County as part of their *Creating Healthy Place in Suffolk County* initiative. Funding for the initiative is provided by the New York State Department of Health.

"All the elements of a successful garden are here: good soil, air, water, sunlight and most importantly, people," said Susan Wilk, Project Coordinator of Creating Healthy Place in Suffolk County.

Joan Avolese Mannino, Administrator of the Mercy Enrichment Program, which includes Growing Together, shared stories of the incredible enthusiasm of Garden Members.

"It's been such a wonderful experience to have so many different groups come together to work together to create this beautiful place." Ms. Avolese-Mannino said.

Garden Members, volunteers from the corporate world, and Mercy Haven staff united to build the raised boxes, move compost, plant vegetables, and construct a green house. They came together in a resolution to continue

giving, as well, as each group will donate 5% of their yield to local food pantries.

"I'm excited about the garden because I want to give back," said John, who lives at one of Mercy Haven's three Community Residences. "Part of what we grow will go to the homeless and I used to be homeless. I'm glad I can help others who are having a hard time."

John also shared the health benefits of the garden. "I've lost 90 pounds in the last year," he said. "I know that eating the vegetables we grow will help me keep healthy and continuing to lose weight."

Sister Pat, Ms. Wilk and a representative from each garden group took part in a ceremonial ribbon cutting. Ms. Wilk also presented Mercy Haven with a scale that will be used to track how much the garden produces.

Some groups have already begun to

harvest vegetables including radishes, lettuce and broccoli. The Growing Together Garden has, at this early stage of its first season, already yielded more than 5 pounds of produce.

Established in 1985, Mercy Haven's mission is to acknowledge the dignity and potential of people who are homeless, living with mental illness, or living in poverty by providing housing, advocacy, education, and life skills development.

