



Monday, January 27, 2014

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BIG TOWN BIG IDEA

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Time is ripe for gardeners

New Yorkers do extraordinary things to improve their neighborhoods.

BY HOLLY REICH / NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

THURSDAY, JANUARY 23, 2014, 11:24 AM

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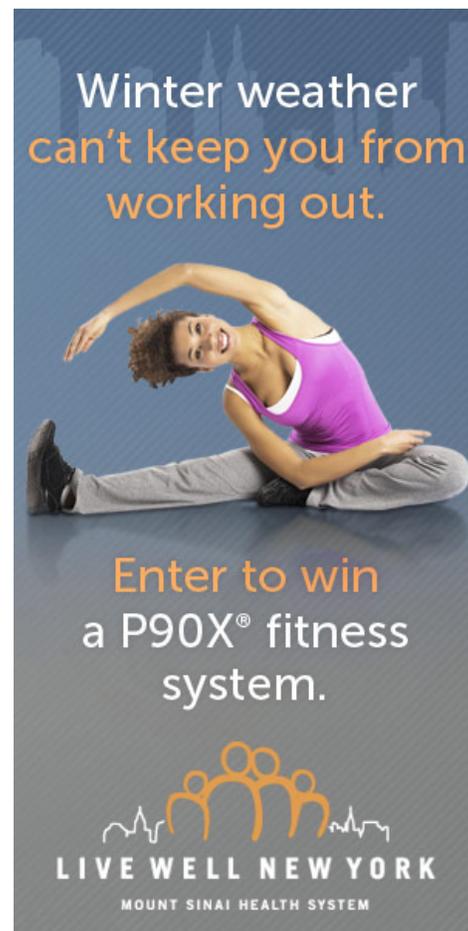


DAILY NEWS

Brownsville resident Brenda Duchene was honored in 2012 with the President of the United States' Volunteer Service Award recognizing her long history of volunteerism, most notably her efforts to grow fresh produce after turning vacant lots into community gardens.

New Yorkers do extraordinary things to improve their neighborhoods. Since 1975, many New Yorkers have turned to Citizens Committee for New York City for help. The committee provides grants of up to \$3,000 to low-income neighborhood groups to support in the design and implementation of their own neighborhood projects.

Brenda Duchene, founder of Isabahlia Ladies of Elegance, a nonprofit named after her mother, has taken advantage of the grant to change her neighborhood. Last year she was awarded the



BIG TOWN BIG HEART

A healthy start in life



Being green is not always easy – a point the second-grade students at Public School 20 on Webster Avenue in the Bronx have been learning over the past several weeks – but it is rewarding.

Santa's helpers: Volunteers create Christmas mornings for local

President's Call to Service Award by the White House for the work she has done in Brownsville, Brooklyn.

Duchene became an urban farmer after founding Isabahlia Ladies of Elegance in 2009. The group seeks to provide the community access to affordable, fresh and healthy produce year-round while engaging residents in a variety of gardening workshops. Isabahlia has received over \$6,000 in funding from the Citizens Committee.

"These grantees are hyper-local, below-the-radar groups of ordinary New Yorkers overlooked by foundations, corporations and other funders in the city. Projects range from creating community gardens and school murals to grass roots anti-gun violence initiatives and those supporting access to fresh affordable produce," says Saleen Shah, director of communications for the Citizens Committee.

With four grants (awarded from 2010 to present), Duchene, who works with a group of seven other senior ladies, has installed a cooler storage room to keep fruits and vegetables from spoiling and constructed a 28-foot greenhouse to extend the growing season. This past summer, grant money also helped fund youth activities and the transformation of a vacant lot into a community garden.

Duchene gets to the garden at 5 a.m. every morning to turn on the sprinklers. Her dedication has paid off. "They said build it, and they will come. Show them, and they will participate," says Duchene.

"I have lived in this community since 1987 and have always felt that we were the forgotten community. I would love for everyone to have good health," she explains.

Providing fresh affordable produce is more necessary than ever, especially for the outer boroughs. To address the lack of fresh and organic produce in the South Bronx, La Finca del Sur/South Bronx farmers produced 3,000 pounds of produce over four years within a 2½ acre site. The group boasts a women-majority directorship that is dedicated to women's empowerment, and the social and economical improvement of the Mott Haven neighborhood of the South Bronx, one of the poorest congressional districts in the U.S. Since its founding in 2009, La Finca del Sur has received over \$8,000 in funding from the Citizens Committee.

The contributions from the Citizens Committee helped the initiative install a 300-gallon rain harvesting system, construct a greenhouse for its Urban Farmer Collaborative and revitalize a block in the South Bronx.

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"When we came into this space, there were weeds taller than the average person, and there was an entire homeless community living here," says Nancy Ortiz-Surun, group leader of La Finca del Sur.

"This has brought me back to my own roots as a Latino woman, and it's tapped into a lot of different areas of learning. I've had to fund raise, lead meetings and run the business. But this is not a one-woman show. It's very collaborative."

Speaking of how she became involved with the garden, Ortiz-Surun notes, "It was an unexpected road. As someone who was raised here in the South Bronx, I realize that we have to overcome our daunting past and think not what is being done to the South Bronx, but what we can do about it."

One way La Finca del Sur is changing its community is through educating and empowering the next generation.

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"People are becoming more knowledgeable every day about the lack of food in this area. Growing is part of our heritage. We need to keep this going and pass the information down to our children. It's

homeless families



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Lesson in caring



Six thousand volunteers turned out for New York Cares Day last Saturday, continuing an annual tradition devoted to revitalizing New York City's public schools.

The art of volunteering



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BIG TOWN BIG IDEA

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Time is ripe for gardeners



New Yorkers do extraordinary things to improve their neighborhoods. Since 1975, many New Yorkers have turned to Citizens Committee for New York City for help.

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for the health of our community," she concludes.

Want to make a change in your community? The Neighborhood Grants 2014 application is downloadable at www.citizensnyc.org. The deadline to apply is January 27, 2014.

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When Volunteers of America-Greater New York (VOA-GNY) was looking for something different to add to their roster of programs for veterans, laughing yoga topped the list.

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