

Evergreen Minds, Inc.

Proposal for Intergenerational & Dementia-Friendly Community Garden

Partnership Project with Lifelong Learning Institute at Vassar College

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Background

There has never been a time when social connection between people and the natural world is more important. The Covid-19 pandemic has created another health crisis of increased social isolation and perceived loneliness among older people. This isolation and loneliness have perpetuated rapid declines in cognition, increased feelings of depression, anxiety, poor sleep, decreased physical exercise and greater risk for heart disease, stroke, and earlier death (CDC, 2021; WHO, 2021; Sepúlveda-Loyola, et al., 2020; Hwang, et al., 2020). Social isolation does not just negatively impact older people. Younger people and adults of all ages who express perceived social isolation report lower quality of life and well-being (Clair, et al., 2021; Weissbourd, et al., 2021).



Stigma, Ableism and Ageism

Stigma is a common reality for people who are living with dementia. There is often fear and negative perceptions about dementia which can create challenges in relationships with friends and family members. This stigma can also impact research as diseases such as Alzheimer's, Lewy Body Dementia and Frontotemporal Dementia are funded less by the government compared to other diseases, despite an increase in costs for caring for people living with these progressive and fatal diseases (Alzheimer's Association, 2021).

Prejudice and discrimination against people with disabilities is called ableism. People living with dementia are often excluded from health care conversations, policies, and social and

professional platforms. Unfortunately, ableism often intersects with ageism. Ageism, which is the stereotyping and discrimination based on age, is the most widely accepted form of prejudice. Discrimination and negative stereotypes about aging and older people are deeply rooted into our age-defying culture. We have seen ageism in plain view during this pandemic as “age has been used as the sole criterion for access to medical care, lifesaving therapies and for physical isolation” (WHO, 2021). Research shows that education about aging and building intergenerational relationships, can help reduce ageism (WHO, 2021; Burnes, et al., 2019).

Health Benefits of Gardening

There is growing empirical evidence to support the many benefits of being outside in natural spaces including the benefits of sunshine and breathing in the healing phytoncides from trees and plants (Li, 2010). According to AARP, gardening has many benefits which include: 1) Exposure to vitamin D 2) Decreased dementia risk 3) Mood-boosting benefits (reduced depression and anxiety) 4) Enjoyable aerobic exercise and 5) Helps combat loneliness (AARP, 2017; Soga, Gaston & Yamaurac, 2017). Breathing in microbes in the soil called *Mycobacterium vaccae*, have been shown to boost mental and emotional well-being by triggering production of serotonin and improving brain function (Fox, et al., 2021; Reber, et al., 2016; O’Brien, et al., 2004).

Growing Together: An Intergenerational & Dementia-Friendly Community Garden:

The objective of ‘*Growing Together*’ is to join people of various ages and cognitive abilities to create a community garden where ALL are welcome as they ARE. The focus is on *abilities not disabilities*, and to promote intergenerational relationships and understanding that people living with dementia are able to continue to contribute to society and live a life of purpose and meaning.

Evergreen Minds will *enlist volunteers* from the VCLLI, Vassar College, Eagle scouts and members of our community who may be living with dementia and their loved ones. Evergreen Minds plans to share this opportunity with local churches and synagogues, senior



community centers, adult day centers, Dutchess County Office for the Aging and the local chapter of the Alzheimer's Association.

The premise is simple. Bring people together in meaningful relationship with one another and the land. The gardeners will be given complete autonomy in the garden from the planning stage to active planting, harvesting and decisions on what to do with harvest (ie: donate to local food bank, have a celebratory harvest picnic, donate flowers to local nursing homes, etc).

Our community does not currently have any offering like this. As our society demographics continue to shift and grow evermore diverse, it is important to decrease misperceptions and to grow collaborations, empathy and understanding between people. Growing Together is an opportunity for people old, young and in-between, to learn *from and with* one another, while enjoying something unique and inspiring.

The Growing Together project, as the name states, demonstrates that like a garden, WE are continually a work in progress, and growth continues throughout our lives and does not end with a diagnosis of dementia.



This project will represent Vassar College, VCLLI, the Community Garden Project and Evergreen Minds, Inc. in a positive light (via press release and word of mouth) demonstrating a commitment to our community members' health and well-being. In addition, and even more importantly, it will also illustrate that people are meant to be together and live a good quality of life. People of all ages can and contribute to society and this does not end when someone experiences changes in cognition or abilities.

The plan is to recruit local Eagle Scout troop to help build raised garden beds for people who may not be able to get to the ground, and secure donors for seeds, plantings and resources to help pay for gardening equipment and supplies. Evergreen Minds board members and Executive Director will utilize fundraising and seek support from local businesses. Evergreen Minds will be responsible to publicize the event and help recruit volunteers and participants and share 'Growing Together' fundraisers in our emails, social media platforms, etc. VCLLI will support Evergreen Minds in publicizing this program on their platforms (newsletter, website, email).

Each person who joins this project will commit to being a part of the garden and will sign up for a daily slot each week to care for the garden throughout the growing season. (such as weeding, fertilizing, watering, dead-heading etc).

As a social gerontologist and creative arts therapist who has spent well over 20 years working with and designing programs for older people and people living with dementia, it would be a great honor and privilege to be supported by the VCLLI and Vassar College to offer this project with heart.

In addition, it would be an enjoyable, engaging and joyful way to spend spring and summer *in community* after a very difficult two years.

Thank you for considering this project!

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