

The Ability Garden pays tribute to Horticultural Therapy Week 2008: Phyllis Meole honored by CCAHTA

Staff members of Cooperative Extension's Ability Garden invited students and the general public to a seminar focusing on applications of horticultural therapy in a variety of therapeutic settings at UNCW to mark Horticultural Therapy Week this year.

Heather Kelejian, Phyllis Meole, Claire Hetzel, and Nicolle Nicolle each gave their unique perspective.

Heather has worked extensively with a variety of populations and began the seminar with an overview of the field of horticultural therapy. She then described the development of the Ability Garden's programs since its inception in 1999.

Phyllis, who is a registered horticultural therapist, then described her approach to the problems she encounters in the lives of her participants.

"Social isolation is the theme for all of our participants," she said. When they come to the Ability Garden and work with plants in a social group they feel they are making a contribution to society. The positive social interaction also leads to a reduction in their overall stress level.

"They have an opportunity to do work that makes sense, that isn't just busy work," she added.

Phyllis explained that horticultural therapy was uniquely flexible. She said the therapist can "crank it up or crank it down," depending on the needs of the particular group they are working with.

"Horticultural therapy is more than just an outing," she continued. "It provides engagement with nature that can have a very powerful effect on

people," that can lead to positive growth and change.

Claire, who is a horticultural therapy intern studying under Phyllis, explained how the registration process works and what the standards are that are set by the American Horticultural Therapy Association.

Claire's work focuses primarily on a replication of the Ability Garden that is taking place at Davis Health Care Center, a long-term living facility for older adults, some of whom are living with Alzheimer's. The goal is to create a successful and sustainable horticultural therapy program that will be maintained by the Center's existing recreational therapy staff after the Ability Garden has completed developing the program.

"We're trying to offer something a little different than bingo," she said, adding, "There is a disconnect with some of these participants that we hope to mend in the garden."

Phyllis added, "With old people there is old knowledge; horticultural therapy just primes the pump."

"When I'm working with someone who is very agitated or confused,"

Claire continued, "just getting the pot of dirt in front of them is all it takes, and away they go!"

The final speaker of the evening was Nicolle Nicolle, who runs a horticultural therapy program at Pender Correctional Facility, a medium-security men's prison in Burgaw, NC. She said her program is the only one in North Carolina that is serving inmates with developmental disabilities, and now is also receiving most inmates who are mentally ill as well. Another population that is



Clockwise from top: Nicolle Nicolle, Claire Hetzel, Heather Kelejian



growing are elderly inmates and those that are confined to wheelchairs.

Nicolle explained that her participants are placed in the horticultural therapy program after taking a test rather than by choice. The focus of the therapy is cognitive behavior modification in a garden setting. "What we want to change are the behaviors that got them into prison in the first place," she said.

Besides changing behavior, horticultural therapy reduces blood pressure, depression, and other conditions that then require less medication, so that one effect of the program is a reduction in the cost of incarceration.

"One thing they often say is 'the voices are not as loud in the greenhouse.'"

"Our inmates participate in the program for one full year," Nicolle continued. "Usually this is the first thing in their lives that they have completed." When their behavior is inappropriate they lose days toward progress, but when they are finally successful, the experience can be very moving.

Rec therapy students from UNCW were the main attendees at the seminar, along with some Ability Garden supporters



"They talk a lot about where they're going to hang their diploma in their mama's house," she said.

Mary Ann Torres also spoke about the experience of being a volunteer at the Ability Garden and observing the effects of horticultural therapy up close.

"Every year something special happens," she said, from something small like a first smile to something more involved like a volunteer placement for a participant. "There is always a first time for a person in the community to discover a place for a family member to make friends and discover hidden talents."

Mary Ann pointed out that there are very few resources in the community

for people with special needs. The Ability Garden is unique in offering programming for such a wide range of needs, from mental health concerns to developmental disabilities to conditions associated with aging.

Heather summarized the possibilities for horticultural therapy, as an intervention for school aged children and youth, in adult care facilities, and even in Hospice settings. Anywhere recreational therapy is appropriate, horticultural therapy can be integrated into the programming.

In a surprise conclusion to the event, Phyllis Meole, who has worked at the Ability Garden since 1999, and has been a registered horticultural therapist for twenty years, was recognized by the Carolinas Chapter of the American Horticultural Therapy Association as Outstanding Therapist for 2007-2008. Mary Ann presented her with a plaque, and cake was offered to the audience.



Mary Ann Torres, right, long-time Ability Garden volunteer and friend of Phyllis, presents the award



Phyllis expresses her appreciation



From left: Beryl Glover, Beth Ann Scisco, Mary Ann Torres, Nicolle Nicolle, Claire Hetzel, Heather Kelejjan, Phyllis Meole, Lorraine Perry