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Planting New Hope in Hampton

A garden project fosters cultural exchange between one Syrian family and students at Hampton Middle School

— *Chinelo Onwualu* —



Mr. Foote and his student, Payton.

When war broke out in Syria, Reham Abazid left all that mattered behind, including her family's beloved vegetable garden, in the city of Dara'a, before moving to Saint John and taking up residence in a second-floor apartment.

"Through the war we lost many things we loved," remembers Abazid, who arrived in 2015 with her husband and two children to rebuild their lives.

A program spearheaded by students who are part of a WE Schools service-learning club is creating an opportunity for Abazid to put down literal roots.

In January, Abazid and her family were chosen to be part of an intercultural gardening project between the Syrian community and the ME to WE Team at Hampton Middle School. The project, funded by a grant from the Canadian Teachers' Federation, teaches a newcomer family how to grow vegetables in Canada.

Abazid, who never forgot the garden she left behind, jumped at the chance to adapt her gardening skills to a new climate.

"I knew that this was something she would welcome and have her children involved in," said Sheri McAulay, cultural diversity officer at PRUDE, an organization that promotes diversity in Saint John. McAulay met Abazid in 2015, and she recommended her for the program. "She is sort of the ambassador for a lot of other Syrian families."

The garden project is the brainchild of Dan Foote, a science and social studies teacher at Hampton Middle School in Hampton, a rural enclave 30 minutes from Saint John. Foote was inspired by meeting Marc Kielburger, co-founder of WE, and attending WE Day Atlantic in 2013.

This year's WE Day, which will be held on Wednesday, October 16 at the Scotiabank Centre

in Halifax, brings together world-renowned speakers, A-list performers and 8,000 young people in celebration of a year of transformative action. When Foote attended in 2013, it was the first time he had experienced such an unparalleled event that inspired so many young people. Afterward, he started his own ME to WE Team at his school. "I've been motivated and challenged ever since."

During his career, Foote has seen many newcomer families relying on food banks to get them through the toughest times. When he moved to Hampton, he marvelled at how families there supplemented their limited incomes with food they'd grown themselves. He began thinking of ways to share those gardening and food preservation skills with the families in Saint John.

"When you go to the food bank it's relying on somebody else's giving, whereas a garden doesn't require anybody else—outside the training," he notes.

Self-sufficiency is something of a central theme for Foote. It's also been a focus for his WE Team, who helped plan and implement the project. In January, the team met with Abazid to decide what would go into the garden.

For Payton Garnett, 12, this was her favourite part, because she got to learn the Arabic names of common vegetables. "It was kinda cool to learn what [Abazid] would call them and what we would call them."

Students then planted the seeds for the vegetables they'd chosen in pots and trays in their school classroom in February. In June, they transplanted the nursery plants to the community garden at the Crescent Valley Community Centre in Saint John. Over the summer, the students worked with Abazid's family to grow the vegetables to harvest in the fall.



Plants bloom in the community garden planted by the Hampton Middle School ME to WE Team at the Crescent Valley Community Centre.

The project has helped deepen the connections between the Syrian newcomer community and the area's older, mostly white, residents. The group plans to have a potluck holiday dinner in December, where newcomers can bring their traditional foods to share with the Hampton students and their families.

Foote and his group will attend WE Day Atlantic later this month. They plan to share what they've learned over the last year with the hundreds of other schools that are expected to attend the event.

"It's definitely a two-way street," said Foote. "For the families, they're learning about gardening, but for the kids they're learning about culture."

For Abazid, being part of the project has been an opportunity to recover from the pain of her past. "When I came here, lots of Canadians gave me everything, and now I have to give back."

McAuley can attest to that growth. "Every time she shares her story, I've seen her getting stronger and stronger."

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Media generously provided by the Globe and Mail.