

Garden helps Fort Lauderdale complex's sense of community grow



William Flakes Sr., left, and his daughter, Debbie Shaham, join Cleveland Daniels as the trio tends the garden at Dixie Court Apartments. (Photo by Andra Liwag)

By Andra Liwag, Special Correspondent
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Collard greens and broccoli tops poke through the organic soil to meet the sunshine while 10 residents of Fort Lauderdale's Dixie Court Apartments strain to get a peek.

"I'm looking forward to the collards," said resident Cleveland Daniels, 72, from his wheelchair as he pulled up to one of the multi-tiered planters. "Then we need some okra and carrots." "Sounds good to me," Luvonie McCray chimed in. The pair has gathered with their neighbors to tend this new garden, an experiment in edible landscaping in the heart of the city's affordable housing district.

As the crop nears harvest, Michael Madfis, an urban farmer from Fort Lauderdale Vegetables, teaches the group. He knows that without this garden, many residents of the 254-unit affordable housing complex at 940 S. Dixie Court won't have ready access to fresh, healthy produce.

"We are in a true food desert," Madfis said. "We are at least 40 blocks from the nearest Publix or Winn-Dixie, and there isn't even a direct bus route to get there." It's why Scott Strawbridge, director of development and facilities for the city's housing authority, helped bring the edible landscape concept to Fort Lauderdale, starting at Dixie Court.

"In low-income neighborhoods, the food inequity is endemic," Strawbridge said. "Rebuilding a neighborhood is not just about new housing. To thrive, people need food, education, physical wellness, shelter, an occupation and emotional wellness. Food is right at the top of that list." Strawbridge's vision is supported by a partnership between the housing authority, its Step-Up Apprenticeship Initiative, and the Carlisle Development Group, which builds affordable housing like the 2-year-old Dixie Court complex.

The partnership recently unveiled the edible landscape at Dixie Court, which includes trellises and 18 multi-level raised garden beds. Lindsay Lecour, senior development manager for Carlisle, said Dixie Court's edible landscapes will serve as a blueprint for the partnership's upcoming affordable housing projects throughout Fort Lauderdale. "The best part for me is seeing how excited the residents are to get outside and get some fresh air in the garden. They are seriously caring for it," she said.

The partnership also aims to donate 25 percent of the yield to the Pantry of Broward, which provides meals for seniors in need and those raising their grandchildren. The garden's surplus will potentially be sold to local restaurants, with profits reinvested in the neighborhood.

Strawbridge said he was especially pleased with Step-Up's involvement with the effort. The program provides low-income Fort Lauderdale residents ages 18 to 35 with access to education, job skills and employment opportunities while working to rehabilitate housing in their community.

"This is also about bringing people together," he said. "Our mission is to assist low-income families with safe, decent and affordable housing opportunities as they strive to achieve self-sufficiency and improve their lives. We're building a community."

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