

Bringing Nature Indoors

Eldergrow comes to Parker Institute

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You've been doing it wrong all these years.

The proper way to experience a flower's fragrance is not to thrust your nose close to it. Instead, you gently rub its leaves between your fingers and then sniff your digits.

That was the first of what no doubt will be many lessons at the Parker Jewish Institute for Health Care and Rehabilitation in New Hyde Park as it introduced the Eldergrow program to its residents on June 7.

The brainchild of Seattle's Orla Concannon, the program draws upon at least two centuries of scientific observations of the therapeutic value of gardening and working the soil.

At the center of its activities is a "growth table," a movable indoor therapy garden with "grow" lights and an accessible flowerbed filled with safe organic soil into which residents plant nontoxic flora, including herbs for eating and healing.

Before introducing Concannon, Michael Rosenblut, Parker's president and CEO, raised his hand and asked, "How many people were gardeners or took care of their lawns in their younger days?"

A few did, and one woman commented, "Younger young days" to laughter.

Rosenblut stated, "So if you want to continue doing the landscaping and gardening, this will give you an opportunity."

During her brief comments, Concannon flashed a few slides, the first of which defined therapeutic horticulture as "the use of plants to improve your quality of mind,



Therapy's Benefits

In 2014, the University of Washington reviewed 99 studies on the health benefits of horticulture. Among the findings:

- Daily gardening reduced dementia risk factors by 36 percent
- Improved mood and attention span in people with depression
- Helped chronic pain patients cope better
- Improved memory and motor skills and reduced use of medications

Eldergrow CEO Orla Concannon (left) gives instructions to Ramesh Khurana (center) and Lillian Finkelstein (right) at the indoor therapy garden table. INSET: James Taylor experiences the fragrance of a mint plant with help from Kimeka Randall. (Photos by Frank Rizzo)

body and spirit."

The CEO of the company she founded in 2015, after working for a senior living facility, summed up the aim of the program: "What we do is bring nature indoors. That's the whole premise. You might not be able to get out in [the winter months], so this (pointing at the "growth table") will be indoors 12 months a year."

Among the bits of information she dispensed, Concannon mentioned a "Room With A View" study in the 1980s that put this kind of therapy into what she called "a real formal practice."

Patients at a medical facility that had windows looking out into nature, she related, were [on average] discharged a day earlier, buzzed for a nurse less often and took fewer medicines than those without a view.

Concannon introduced Sabina Boccia of Garden City, who will lead the twice-monthly programs, and told the residents what to expect: "We're going to teach cultural classes. We're going to make essential oils. We'll also do

garden art classes."

And another thing to look forward to: "We'll be doing culinary classes," Concannon said. "We'll grow basil from seed, then come back three months later and make a Caprese salad. You're actually going to eat your harvest."

A press release by the Parker Institute noted that, "This project provides opportunities for sensory stimulation and creative expression, while affording patients and residents a new sense of purpose as they go about caring for their garden."

Concannon passed a small potted plant around, and said the first resident to name it would take ownership.

She gave out several cues, and the one about "rubbing as an ointment" elicited the right answer: "Vicks."

"Yes. Vicks plant," she said, and did not have to mention that many pharmaceuticals are derived from plants.

"Wow," someone called out in an awed tone.

Proving, again, that you are never too old to learn something new.

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