

# Growing a healthy partnership, one garden at a time

By Larry Oaks

**W**e've got to find a way to help our children get outside and socialize. We need to help them feel productive!"

"The single greatest threat my child faces is the risk of becoming sick and dying as a result of poor eating habits."

"Our kids deserve access to fresh and healthy food."

"Make it happen."

The words echoed in my ears as I drove north on Route 128 on a chilly February night back in 2020. I was on my way home to Gloucester from a two hour-long listening session I had convened in Norwood with a group of vocal parents and caregivers, who a year prior had entrusted the care of their disabled adult children to the organization I lead – Mainstay Supportive Housing and Homecare, a Newton-based nonprofit that operates supportive housing communities

across Massachusetts for adults with developmental disabilities, persons living with mental illness and extremely low-income households.

I kept asking myself, "How on earth are we going to introduce healthy fresh foods – especially fresh vegetables – to a group of people in a residential program who we already know really don't want to eat that stuff?"

The answer to that question would come later that year in what I now describe as a lightbulb moment.

I came up with the idea to install vegetable gardens at the residences where our clients live and give them an opportunity to roll up their sleeves and work together with their housemates and loved ones to grow their own fresh food.

In 2020, I was entering my second year as a member of the board of directors of The Backyard Growers (BYG), a

Gloucester-based nonprofit that provides resources and support to help families and community groups establish vegetable gardens, as well as my third year as the new president of Mainstay.

My lightbulb moment was all about bringing two halves of my professional life together. The lightbulb that suddenly switched on illuminated the possibilities that a new nonprofit partnership could have in order to positively impact vulnerable people's lives.

Last month, working in partnership with Mainstay, BYG installed two new 8'x12' garden beds at Mainstay's residence for adults with developmental disabilities in Norwood. Today, a newly-formed garden club – which includes residents, Mainstay staff, caregivers, and client family members – has already begun sowing seedlings, and by early fall program participants will be enjoying carrots, beets, let-

tuce and tomatoes that they have grown themselves.

We plan to continue the Mainstay-BYG partnership into 2023 and beyond. We operate supportive housing communities across the region and our goal is to provide the 400 people we serve every day with access to fresh vegetables that they can have a chance to grow and harvest.

According to the US Department of Agriculture, low-income households tend to eat less nutritious diets than other households. All too often, people who struggle to make ends meet also struggle to meet federal recommendations for consumption of fruit, vegetables and other fresh and nutritious foods. Nutrition researchers have also documented that persons with intellectual disabilities, especially moderately disabled people, often become overweight with age as a result of poor diets, and those with more se-

vere intellectual disabilities tend to suffer from under nutrition.

Backyard Growers launched a new consulting service in 2021 to help organizations teach the populations they serve how to grow their own food. Mainstay intends to work with BYG to establish new garden beds at as many of its 12 supportive housing developments as possible.

If we can identify a sunny patch of grass at any of our buildings, we're going to install a planting bed on it. Because the truth is that the meals we were serving didn't include enough fresh vegetables. We needed to do better, and we have plans for the future to make it happen.

*Larry Oaks is the president of Mainstay Supportive Housing and Home Care.*