

CAL-STATE-FULLERTON

Cal State Fullerton program digs into farm-to-table culture to help students, foster youth

University's farm, U-ACRE program, partner with Monkey Business Cafe



California State University, Fullerton students and workers plant seeds at the university's arboretum in Fullerton, CA on Wednesday, May 1, 2019. The vegetables are being grown for the Monkey Business Cafe in Fullerton. (Photo by Paul Bersebach, Orange County Register/SCNG)

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This is the first story in an occasional series about how the Fullerton Arboretum, Cal State Fullerton's U-ACRE program and Monkey Business Cafe in Fullerton are partnering to provide farm-to-table produce and teach research and life skills to CSUF students and youth who have been in the foster care system. This story focuses on the program's half-acre farm at the Arboretum.

Jaeda Snow and Danielle Rhee are starting the process that will end with farm-fresh vegetables being added to the menu at the Monkey Business Cafe.

Working at a large potting table at the Fullerton Arboretum, the two Cal State Fullerton students are placing sweet pepper and basil seeds into dozens of small containers, taking care that the seeds are planted at the right depth for proper exposure to the sun.

In the next week or two, the seedlings will be moved to the adjacent greenhouse and later to a farm on the south side of the Arboretum, where they will be planted among the other crops — lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, celery, squash, peas and beets.

"I didn't realize CSUF had something like this where you can go out in the community and do your own research while helping the local communities," said Rhee, a geography and child development major. "I think it's amazing that they're using the food that we grow."

The half-acre farm is the result of a partnership called I-CAN, where CSUF students work with teens and young men who have been in the foster care system to grow and harvest produce that will be used at the Fullerton restaurant.

Program leaders say it gives the students a chance to develop research skills and see how their work can benefit the community. And the current and emancipated foster youth learn about agriculture but also work at the restaurant — as servers, bussing tables or even coming up with recipes using the vegetables they grow — skills they can put on their resumes, they said.

Assisting in the program are members of the Arboretum staff, including curator Gregory J. Pongetti and horticulturist Emmanuel Romo, who provide their expertise.

"Everybody is working together for a common good," said Greg Dymont, director of the Arboretum. "And it all starts, really, with plants. It gets people into plants. Of course people like to eat. And once you learn that a lot of the plants we're

Rhee and Snow, who graduated about two weeks ago with a bachelor's in anthropology and a minor in geography, are among the 15 members of the university's Urban Agriculture Community-based Research Experience program (U-ACRE), which is supported by a four-year, Hispanic-Serving Institution grant from the USDA National Institute for Food and Agriculture expected to total \$1 million.

Students don't have to be agriculture majors to be part of U-ACRE, said Sara Johnson, an anthropology professor who directs the program. Aside from the Arboretum farm, U-ACRE also works on garden projects at Pathways of Hope, a transitional center for the homeless and low-income in Anaheim and Fullerton, and Ladera Vista School of the Arts and Hermosa Drive Elementary School, both in Fullerton.

In I-CAN, or Integrating Culinary, Agriculture and Nutrition, CSUF students use research methods, including apps and science and engineering software, to determine the best time for planting, growth rates, the plants with the highest yield and even the best variety of vegetable for the table.

"This is experiential learning where they get hands on and can start thinking about the use of time and space," Johnson said. "You've got to think about how long it's going to take before it can get to the farm, and once it's at the farm, what is its growth rate. And how can we be able to tell the restaurant what's coming and when?"

The program is funded with a four-year \$400,000 USDA NIFA Community Food Project grant.

Another partner is the Fullerton nonprofit Hart Community Homes, which provides residential treatment for boys ages 12 to 18 in the foster care system. The youths go through a six-month paid job training program and work with a job coach.

"It's refreshing to meet people who want to make things better for no reason other than making it better," said Cari Hart-Bunevith, executive director of Monkey Business Cafe and Hart Community Homes in Orange, her family's business.

Eighty percent of the workers at Monkey Business are foster youth, she said.

"A lot of the kids that came into the program go on to become mentors," Hart-

“It’s created a culture of acceptance and unconditional love. It’s like a family, which is good.”

On a recent weekday morning, Roy Reid, the farming supervisor for Monkey Business, was busy overseeing spring planting, tearing up the ground and getting it ready for the new seeds.

He pulled out a candy cane beet he thought was ready for harvest. The inside, he said, looks like a candy cane.

He also held out the result of an experiment — pink celery.

And he pointed to strategic plantings of African marigolds and dill, which he said are natural pesticides that fight off aphids.

For the last five months, lettuce from the farm has been used in salads and sandwiches at Monkey Business.

It’s also a topic of research.

“How much lettuce does it take?” Hart-Bunevith said. “So they’re constantly planting and pulling based on what our needs are at the cafe.”

A goal is to have 100 percent of the restaurant’s lettuce come from the Arboretum farm, she said.

Reid, 28, came through the foster system himself, and has been with Monkey Business almost 10 years. He originally came to Fullerton from Atlanta and has a bachelor’s in business from Central State University in Ohio.

“This is something I love doing — working with people and growing food,” he said.

Farm future?

The Fullerton Arboretum farm is part of the area discussed at a recent public meeting on an [updated Master Plan for Cal State Fullerton](#).

Three options for the plan include some development on the south area of the Arboretum. The ideas most often mentioned were a conference center with housing and meeting space and a student wellness center.

A final report with one preferred plan is expected to be reviewed at a future Board of Trustees meeting.

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