

One Ocean County bringing communities together

By Pat Johnson

One Ocean County is a 501c3 nonprofit dedicated to improving relations between the diverse populations that make up Ocean County. Founded by activist members of the Orthodox Jewish community in 2021, it has already established a community garden and offered fun events for the entire community. At the top of the list this autumn is the 2nd annual Fall Festival happening on October 22 from 2 to 5 p.m. (rain date Oct. 29) at the Common Grounds Community Garden located in John Patrick Sports Complex, Lakewood. It is sponsored by the Ocean County Cultural & Heritage Commission and the Jewish Federation of Ocean County.

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The festival celebration will include a popular petting zoo, crafts, vendors and garden demonstrations by Head Gardener Ayala Schlossberg and Rutgers Master Gardeners at the community garden. Folks can learn how to propagate plants and save seeds to increase their gardens' productivity. Schlossberg will demonstrate how to use flowers from the garden: chamomile, lavender and marigolds, to make beauty products. Georgian Court University will be an onsite vendor with information on educational opportunities.

There will also be a sensory scavenger hunt based on the different colors, textures and scents found in the garden.

The eleven vegetable and flower beds were recently

raised to make the garden more accessible to seniors and those with physical disabilities. Raising the height of the garden beds allows people to plant, weed and



Common Grounds community garden.
Photo credit: One Ocean County.

harvest while sitting in a chair or wheelchair.

This year students from the School for Children with Hidden Intelligence a school for the severely disabled, have visited each week with their horticultural therapist to watch and enjoy the gardens as they grow through the seasons. The school is dedicated to helping severely-developmentally delayed, medically fragile, and socially-emotionally challenged children & young adults to reach their full potential.

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In order to be environmentally responsible, the gardeners have focused on planting more local perennials such as asparagus, strawberries and flowers adapted to local conditions.

There are theme gardens too such as the Van Gogh flower garden with sunflowers and delphinium--plants that Van Gogh painted in his lifetime. According to One Ocean County founder and director, Tova Herskovitz, Common Grounds is accessible to all. "We let anyone harvest responsibly whatever fruits there are and we have a cutting garden for flowers."

In 2021, Herskovitz and some members of the Orthodox Jewish community decided to found One Ocean County as a way to increase awareness of all the cultures that make Lakewood home.

"A bunch of us decided we needed outlets to let people learn about our culture and community and the garden came from those discussions," she said. Like all good ideas, the organization blossomed to offer many other events. "It's been great, we have all different events and work with different groups: the Troop 61 Girl Scouts from Jackson helped with setting up the garden beds, we hosted a 'Girl's Night Out' for the female officers from the Lakewood Police Department and we encourage more people to come and use the garden.

"We have a volunteer community liaison, Avi Kotler, who works with the homeless population and

runs a program, 'Pass it on for Passover' with the public works department of Lakewood." Traditional Jewish Orthodox women prepare their homes for Passover by divesting the household of all bread items and some other food items before the Holy days. These unopened packages are collected and given to various food pantries. Last year, the group collected fifty boxes of food that was given to the 6th Street Baptist Church Food Pantry and the Just Believe organization.

Another inventive event sponsored by One Ocean County is the Super Soul Party-- a Super Bowl party held for the homeless population at Toms River Urban Air. Large TV's stream the game and participants are provided with snacks, toiletries and services like haircuts—all for free on that truly American sports day.

Lakewood Township and the Lakewood Police Department have been a wonderful partner in these endeavors, said Herskovitz. "They have been generous in providing the land for Common Grounds and in installing a 7-foot fence (to keep deer and vermin out) and they hooked up water to irrigate the four different zones of the gardens."

And the outreach that started as a grass roots group has done much to decrease tensions in the community, said Herskovitz. "We have definitely made inroads and have engaged with a lot of folks that we may not have before."



Youth Talent Initiative students at Common Grounds.
Photo credit: One Ocean County.

For more information go to the One Ocean County Facebook page.