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Clark Botanic Garden cleanup draws special needs, senior volunteers in Albertson

August 13, 2015 by MARA VAN ELLS / mara.vanells@newsday.com



Clients of Human First, a nonprofit that serves adults with developmental disabilities, gathered in Clark Botanic Garden in Albertson Wednesday to dispose of dead leaves, sticks and pine needles.

"Hi-yah!" Kenny Jorge, 28, of Queens exclaimed as he tossed a pile of dead leaves into a large trash can. He leaned over the can to high-five Gargi Gandhi, 28, of Bellerose, who was also throwing away fistfuls of debris.

Over the past two months, Wednesday has evolved into a day when special needs and elderly gardeners volunteer, said Bonnie Klein,

director of horticulture for the garden and the Town of North Hempstead.

Rona Von Mering, 62, of upstate Pine Bush, who is deaf-blind, sat on the edge of a stony path in the 12-acre garden, running her gloved hands over the pebbles. Whenever she located a weed, she ripped it out. Deeper in the garden, Wally Kupferberg, 89, of Little Neck, cut dead flowers off an Oakleaf hydrangea plant.

Kupferberg was the first volunteer. His daughter, Sue-Ann Setton of North Hills, said after Kupferberg's wife died earlier this year, she attempted to find volunteer opportunities to keep her father busy and active.

"We went to a lot of places and got completely dismissed," she said. "Nobody gave him a chance."

Setton said she is grateful to the Town of North Hempstead's parks department for accommodating her father, who is skilled in gardening. When he was younger, Kupferberg had a



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greenhouse filled with plants from all over the world, a pond and a waterfall, he said.

Kupferberg said he loves the environment of Clark Botanic. "Wherever you look, there's a picture," he said.

Deirdre Schnabl, coordinator of day services for Human First in Brooklyn and Queens, said between 10 and 15 agency clients volunteer at the garden each week.

"This is kind of an opportunity for them to get out, learn something that's important for their independent living but is also a work skill," she said.

The volunteer day is to run through the fall, weather permitting.

On Wednesday, those who volunteered raked up and disposed of dead leaves and grass. Farrah Germain, 37, of Ozone Park, deposited an armload of sticks into a garbage can.

Von Mering, a student at the Helen Keller National Center in Sands Point, communicated via tactile American Sign Language through her instructor, Nadea Armogan.

Von Mering, who had her own pottery business for 23 years, signed that she enjoys landscaping, planting trees and flowers, and "being creative and decorative."

For the past two months, she has spent four to five hours each Wednesday volunteering in the garden.

"I really love dirty work," Von Mering signed. "Pottery and landscaping are both dirty."

Town of North Hempstead Supervisor Judi Bosworth said the volunteer opportunity is "a great way of providing a wonderful summer gardening experience."

Those who wish to volunteer can call the Town of North Hempstead at 516-869-6311.

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