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FEATURED

High School paraprofessional a Kale Blazer award recipient

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MIKE SPRINGER/Staff photoSpecial needs paraprofessional Nancy Burke atands in the salsa section of her award-winning student garden project at Haverhill High School.10/4/2018

MIKE SPRINGER/Staff photo

Haverhill — The founder of a gardening program tailored to students with special needs at Haverhill High School has been named one of this year's Kale Blazer award recipients by the nonprofit Massachusetts Farm to School organization.

Nancy Burke, a special education paraprofessional at the high school, was one of three people in the state to receive the award during a ceremony at the Statehouse in Boston as part of Massachusetts Farm to School Awareness Day on Oct. 3.

The Haverhill Education Association activist has become a nationally recognized advocate for school gardens as teaching tools, according to Mass Farm to School officials.

"It all started at a Massachusetts Teachers Association professional development workshop and it just took off from there," said Burke. "I was truly honored, grateful and blessed to receive this award. Everyone at the high school is supportive of our school garden and promoting farm to school."

The award recognizes people who are at the forefront of the farm to school movement, innovating and setting inspiring examples from which others can learn.

"This is the third year for the award, which is given to someone who is a leader in farm to school activities, such as getting healthy food into school meals or in the case of Burke, doing great work with garden-based learning," said Simca Horwitz, co-director of Mass Farm to School.

She said Burke was nominated by a representative of the Massachusetts Teachers Association, which supports her at the high school.

"Nancy is a farm to school leader and a true inspiration for those of us working to bring healthy, local foods and food education to students across Massachusetts," Horwitz said. "She has turned an abandoned courtyard at the high school into a garden oasis and helps students of all abilities experience the joy of growing their own food."

Burke said she was inspired to start a school garden when she realized the students she was working with did not know how food was grown or where it came from.

In 2012, she began with a salsa garden contained within a single, accessible raised bed where she was able to bring together her special education students and other students from within Haverhill High School.

As part of the garden program, Burke's students are also introduced to basic food preparation skills in the high school's Life Skills Apartment, as well as math skills as they relate to measuring quantities, shopping for groceries and maintaining a food budget.

"Over the years, various groups of students have come together to help make this garden program a success," Burke said. "From the football team to the wrestling team to students in the Jr. ROTC program, they've been the backbone of this project and have come together as a community to help one another."

The project expanded to include a berry garden contained within a second raised bed and a stew garden in a third raised bed. It fostered the growth of a garden club made up of students with differing abilities and in different grades.

This is the fourth year Burke's students have entered their vegetables into the Topsfield Fair in the children's category, special needs school garden. So far, they've won ribbons each year for their vegetables and art posters.

Horwitz said Burke embodies leadership, commitment, and dedication to all the good that comes from school gardens.

Also receiving Kale Blazer awards were Lara Lepionka, executive director of Backyard Growers in Gloucester, who has built an organization that provides resources and support to establish vegetable gardens at public schools, homes, housing communities, and nonprofit organizations.

State Rep. Stephen Kulik (D-First Franklin District), a longtime champion of farm to school and other efforts to build a strong local food system in Massachusetts, also was awarded.

Farm to School was founded in 2004 as a grassroots initiative to strengthen local farms and fisheries and promote healthy communities by increasing local food purchasing and education at schools. Mass. Farm to School works to support a thriving Massachusetts food economy where institutions are a profitable and accessible market for farms and where buying, serving, and teaching students about local food is ingrained in the fabric of schools, colleges, and universities.

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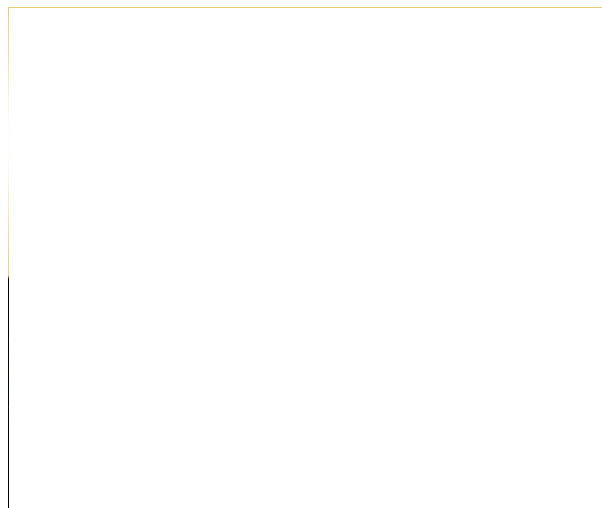
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