

Growing Dreams in West Chicago

By Julie Moore (University of Illinois Extension Master Gardener)



Karen Pachyn discovered something about herself early on in her volunteer experience with the Master Gardener program. "I got hooked on being in a greenhouse! I love the environment, especially in January and February when it's cold outside and the greenhouses are warm and sunny!" Her first year as a Master Gardener in 2009 was the first year that DuPage volunteers were working at

We Grow Dreams in West Chicago. "It was a much different experience that year and we ultimately didn't continue our involvement there because of the lack of opportunity to do any teaching," Karen explained. "But since I was hooked, I stayed on as a community volunteer."

Karen noticed a change when new Executive Director Gregg Bettcher arrived at We Grow Dreams. "He seemed to have a strong interest in making it an educational experience for the student Team Members. I thought that this would be a situation where MGs could again participate and Sarah Navrotski, University of Illinois Extension Master Gardener Program Coordinator, agreed. So we started back in 2016." Karen has been the Team Leader since that time.

Karen Pachyn with Executive Director Gregg Bettcher



We Grow Dreams Greenhouse & Garden Center (WGD) is a not-for-profit corporation that was the shared 'dream' of parents who had kids with disabilities. The parents saw a lack of job training and employment opportunities down the road and wanted to create such a training ground.

The WGD website states:

- the Team Members learn the day-to-day operation of a wholesale and retail greenhouse
- 45 job training skills have been identified at the site
- a craft program has been added to produce garden related products for sale including greeting cards, garden bricks and light catchers from repurposed dishes.

Soft skills which are vitally important in all walks of life are also learned by working on a team, taking instructions from different people in how to complete tasks and interacting with the public. The students who participate are from surrounding school



districts and are in the transition program that is post high school to age 22. On Wednesdays this year the MG volunteers are with West Chicago students. On one particular day this May the Team Members folded cardboard box tops that customers use to place their purchases in and then transitioned over to a Quonset hut to fill containers with potting soil.

On Saturdays year round, former students come with a parent or coach and participate in activities to stay involved at We Grow Dreams. A vegetable garden has been planted the last couple of summers and the produce will now go the Northern Illinois Food Bank that distributes it to multiple food pantries.

The greenhouses are currently filled with beautiful summer flowering annuals, herbs, succulents, and hanging baskets. Outside there are more flowers and perennials. In the late summer and fall you can expect to find mums and many other late season annuals.



Master Gardeners Jerry Dungan and Mike Horsley with Team Leader Karen Pachyn

When Karen described what inspires her commitment to We Grow Dreams she said that working with the students is a primary reason. They seem to really enjoy being there and the smiles and hugs she receives from them help her understand the difference MG involvement makes there. Her husband has a developmentally disabled brother and Karen loves helping other families in a similar situation knowing how much of an impact

it can have. And of course, there are those cozy greenhouses in January and February that keep her coming back as well.

You can visit We Grow Dreams at 1055 W. Washington Street in West Chicago. Go to the website at www.wegrowdreams.org for information about hours and special events.

