

# IC Family Donates Use of Farmland to Help Syracuse's Refugee Population

In 2013 Dylan Letcher, a graduate of Immaculate Conception School in Fayetteville, started a small garden on farmland owned by his family. He wanted to donate the food he grew to those in need. That small seed of service has literally bloomed over the past eight years into what is now Salt City Harvest Farm. It is a place where new Americans — most are refugees — grow food, community and culture through an exchange of food traditions. Lives are changed via access to land, education and economic opportunities.

Sparked by the idea of Dylan's garden, Assumption Church — which serves a large population of refugees on the city's northside — and Syracuse Grows approached the Letcher family about using the land. The family, including mom, Theresa, a Pre-K paraprofessional at IC, donated the use of 36 acres in Kirkville to nonprofit Salt City Harvest Farm. Through this organization, new Americans from countries like Congo, Bhutan, Burundi and Somalia volunteer to work the land, share a sense of community, hone their English skills, and not only take home their harvest but share it with friends

and family facing food insecurity. The farm is also a perfect spot to grow produce unique to their home countries that are not easily found in local stores.

In 2018, another group started volunteering at the farm: deaf new Americans. During the growing season, about 17 members of this organization can be found working the farm and enjoying the opportunity to interact with others who also cannot hear, thus reducing their isolation. The majority are just beginning to learn American Sign Language, so interpreting services are provided both in American Sign Language and Nepali Sign Language at the farm.

Today, Salt City Harvest Farm is a thriving community with an incubator farm, a multi-use storage building, an apple orchard and a vineyard, in addition to fields full of delicious vegetables. Salt City Harvest Farm has been able to accomplish this work through a number of partnerships including Cornell Cooperative Extension, Refugee and Immigrant Self-Empowerment (RISE) and SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry. The organization aims to transform the Central New York community by creating opportunities for New



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Americans to grow foods significant to their traditions and bring together cultures from around the world for the benefit of all.

Over the past year, Salt City Harvest Farm has been developing programs to provide deeper community impact, as well. The farm has received significant funding from the Central New York Community Foundation and the Chobani Impact Fund — which allowed for the construction of a pavilion for increased cold storage access, harvesting tools and connections to market produce to consumers.

While the Letcher family still owns the land, the farm is run by Salt City Harvest Farm and has acquired staff who handle the day-to-day operations.

Before the pandemic, the organization was often found outside Immaculate Conception Church after Sunday Masses selling freshly picked items, thanks to the generosity of IC Pastor Fr. Thomas Ryan. The profits, sometimes \$500 to \$600 a day, were reinvested to purchase things like seeds and tools.

#### **PUMPKIN PATCH POPS UP AT IC**

One of the items that Salt City Harvest Farm produces is pumpkins. When COVID-19 hit in 2020, Immaculate Conception School could no longer take its students on field trips, including the traditional fall excursion to a pumpkin patch.



Coordinated by IC's sixth graders, the school created its own temporary pumpkin patch. With the help of the Letcher family, Salt City Harvest brought pumpkins to the school. Each class took turns wandering through the pumpkin patch, and every student selected his or her favorite to take home. The event was such a success that it was held again in the fall of 2021. The sixth grade class worked hard to make it look just like a real pumpkin patch with festive decorations.

According to Nancy Ferrarone, principal at IC, the hope is that once COVID-19 restrictions ease, the sixth grade students might be able to go to Salt City Harvest Farm and help plant pumpkins in the spring for harvesting the following fall.

"Our connection with the Letchers and Salt City Harvest Farm has shown our students how they can accomplish great things, even during such difficult times, as well as reach out to people who are truly in need," said Ferrarone. "This experience is a unique way in which we can bring our students together and model how to give to others and give back to the community." ■