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## 'COMMUNITY IN CONNECTION'

### New program brings people together during tough times

By CHARLIE ZAVALICK  
EDITOR

**BERNARDS TWP.** – Leading a small group of volunteers working at the “Giving Garden” at Ross Farm in Basking Ridge last Saturday, Stacy Vogel reflected on the challenges she’s faced during a very difficult past year.

Following a devastating fire last December at her farm site off Larger Cross Road in Bedminster, Vogel, an organic farmer and owner of Homestead Slow Food, had to relocate and reinvent herself as the business, as she posted on her Facebook page, “moves forward leaving the ashes behind.”

But on Saturday there was work to be done and little time for looking back.

The half dozen participants on hand literally got down in the dirt to help frame a four-foot wide raised soil bed to protect the garden from hungry “critters,” and to provide additional space for pollinators.

Located on the Somerset County-owned property off North Maple Avenue, the 100-foot-long garden provides hundreds of pounds of fresh vegetables for several local charities each year.

The objective of the “Roots for Recovery” project is to enhance the garden in time for the growing season to help address food insecurity – and to provide meaningful interaction and real hands-on activities for local volunteers.

“We all come here with our own stories, with our own motivations,” Vogel, the project leader, shared during a break. “People are coming together for all kinds of reasons. Most of us feel so powerless right now. This is concrete. We’re seeding community.”

The ongoing project at Ross Farm is one of a series of initiatives newly of-



Photo by Debbie Weisman

Volunteers Jim Lamca, left, of Bridgewater, and Stacy Vogel of Somerville prepare the wooden framework for a raised bed in the “Roots for Recovery” program at the Ross Farm in Basking Ridge on Saturday, March 27. Vegetables grown in the garden are donated to local charities and food pantries.

ferred to residents by Community In Crisis (CIC), the Bernardsville-based non-profit that was created to combat the opioid crisis.

Spearheaded by Ken Musgrove, director of recovery for CIC, the new program is called “Community in Connection.”

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## BERNARDS TOWNSHIP SCHOOL DISTRICT

# Full school days planned in May

**BERNARDS TWP.** – Students would be offered full school days in the first week in May under a recommendation presented to the Board of Education at a virtual meeting on Monday, April 5.

Barring a surge in COVID-19 cases, grades K-12 students who are taking in-school half-days would return from spring break on Monday, April 19; additional students who are signed up for full days would join them on Monday, April 26; and the full days would take effect on Monday, May 3.

The timeline is two weeks later than outlined by school officials in early March, when full days were targeted for the start of the fourth marking period on Monday, April 19.

“We wanted to make a reasonable recommendation for now based on what we’re seeing,” said Superintendent of Schools Nick Markarian. “The goal is trying to move toward normalcy but keeping staff and students safe in the process.”

The district has not had a full day of in-school instruction since Friday, March 13,

2020, before the pandemic forced a shutdown of the schools for the rest of the 2019-20 school year.

But the prospective full days would not be quite the same. Nine district administrators, including all six building principals, laid out detailed safety precautions that included a lunch in which students would need to bring their own food and sit far apart from each other.

Six of the nine board members voiced support for

PLEASE SEE SCHOOL, PAGE 5

# No primary races in Somerset Hills towns

## Two Democrats emerge in Bernards Twp.

As of the 4 p.m. Monday candidate filing deadline, there were no primary contests for municipal seats in the five Somerset Hills towns.

However, the filings did set up races for the November general election in four towns, Bernards Township, Bernardsville, Bedminster and Far Hills, where local seats will be contested in the fall.

Similarly, there will be no primary races for two seats on the Somerset County Board of Commissioners in June, but two Democrats

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and two Republicans will compete for the three-year terms in November.

### Bernards Township

In Bernards Township, four candidates, two Republicans and two Democrats, filed to run for two, three-year terms on the Township Committee.

In somewhat of an oddity, none are current office holders, as the two incumbents,

Republican Joseph Esposito and Democrat Joan Bannan, are not seeking re-election. Both will step down after completing their first terms at the end of the year.

Filing to run for the seats were Republicans Jennifer Asay of Butternut Court and Andrew McNally of West Oak Street. Both first-time candidates now serve

PLEASE SEE RACES, PAGE 5

# Lord Stirling School closed after 56 years

**BERNARDS TWP.** – Housed in an historic building tucked away in one of the township’s more remote areas, the Lord Stirling School put generations of troubled youths on the path to a better life.

The small, private, non-profit day school at 99 Lord Stirling Road served boys and girls, ages 12 to 21, who were struggling in mainstream education. It offered a different approach featuring individualized instruction, specialized classes and programs geared to special needs.

Students would be bused back and forth each day from their home school district. Some would attend for a couple of years, while others would graduate from Lord Stirling with a New Jersey high school diploma

from their sending district. But in September, the school failed to reopen for class for the first time since its debut in 1964.

“Unfortunately, with the pandemic, transportation became difficult as the number of students was dropping a little,” said David Karner of Far Hills, vice president of the school’s six-member Board of Trustees. He said many districts, rather than send students away, had begun to hire more staff to keep them but in a separate setting.

In addition, he said, the school’s director position was vacant and the trustees were having trouble finding a replacement.

“Fiscally, it was getting to where we were challenged, like a lot of other schools,” added Karner, who is also

the Far Hills Borough Council president. The trustees “concluded it didn’t make sense to go on financially. We made the decision to shut the school down.”

Efforts were taken to sell the property to a buyer who would maintain an educational environment, he noted.

He said Our House, Inc., which runs group homes for the developmentally disabled, was “very interested. Unfortunately, it didn’t work out on their end.”

The property was then sold on March 2 to Well Rounded, LLC, of Gladstone, for \$810,000, according to the township Tax Assessor’s Office.

“We sold it to a local builder,” Karner said. “I’m

PLEASE SEE CLOSED, PAGE 5



Photo by Debbie Weisman

The Lord Stirling School at 99 Lord Stirling Road in Basking Ridge, which educated troubled students for 56 years, closed last spring and was sold in March.



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VOL. 124 NO. 14

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Photo by Debbie Weisman

Volunteer Chris Jahn of Basking Ridge cuts wooden planks used during a project to enhance and expand the "Giving Garden" at the Ross Farm in Basking Ridge on Saturday, March 27.



Photo by Debbie Weisman

Andi Williams, left, executive director of Community in Crisis, and Jan Williams of Basking Ridge were among the volunteers lending a hand at the "Roots for Recovery" volunteer garden project at the Ross Farm in Basking Ridge on Saturday, March 27.

## TIMES: Program brings people together in hard times

FROM PAGE 1

It's designed to bring people together to share positive engagement during a pandemic that's largely kept people apart.

"Community is the cure," Musgrove said. "Perhaps not a specific, measurable, scientific cure, but an antidote to the negative consequences of isolation exacerbated by addiction and the pandemic."

In response to the epidemic during the pandemic, CIC last March started offering multiple recovery support meetings and opportunities to socialize digitally.

But personal interaction was missing.

"The confidentiality and anonymity of the platform has had its positive impact on the recovery community, affording them a safe space to share with each other and to have a point of accountability," Musgrove said. "Though connection through screens has met the immediate needs for community, the depth, warmth and intimacy of in-person connection has been missing."

Funded by the Horizon Foundation for New Jersey, Community in Connection programs offers participants "an opportunity to express their varied emo-

tions through a positive alternative channel" in a safe environment, Musgrove said. "Masked, socially distanced in-person interaction has an incredible healing property that is not 100 percent transmissible through a screen."

The activities offered help "soften the negative impact of isolation, challenge the participants on new skills and allow for some good natured, fun interaction."

Local partners such as the Ross Farm have worked with CIC to develop specific projects.

Other partners include the Schiff Nature Preserve in Mendham where guided hikes have been held, and Mane Stream in Oldwick which offers "Horses for a Healthy Lifestyle," hands-on equine workshops.

Also offered are "Adventure Weekends" at Fairview Lake YMCA camp in Sussex County where participants stay in cabins, meet around camp fires and join in activities such as hiking, zip lining and ax throwing competitions. The activities are designed to "build your communication skills, challenge your mind, and get out of your everyday routine," according to CIC promotional material.

Virtual art classes are among the offerings. There's

also an outing to view unique outdoor artwork at the "Grounds For Sculpture" exhibit in Hamilton as "an escape from the boredom and anxiety of our screens."

Musgrove shared some comments he'd heard from program participants afterwards.

Following a hike at the Schiff Preserve on Saturday, March 20, some new friends said they never realized "the treasure that was in their backyard," he said.

"A volunteer at the Ross Farm project remarked how she had driven past the site numerous times without ever stopping," he said.

"A Mandala workshop participant was excited about the soothing nature of her creativity."

Meanwhile, a participant at Mane Stream commented on the benefits of socializing and grooming ponies: "It feels so good to be around the horses, people and to be in the fresh air after being cooped up for so long."

"The common experience of all the participants was the healing nature of community and connection," Musgrove said.

The programs are offered free to participants with group size limitations due to the pandemic.

Andi Williams, executive director of CIC, said Com-



Ken Musgrove, second from left, the director of recovery support for the non-profit Community in Crisis (CIC) organization in Bernardsville, leads a group of participants in "Horses for a Healthy Lifestyle," a new CIC program held at Mane Stream in Oldwick.

munity in Connection programs would probably be repeated based on demand.

The programs provide "creative therapy and expression for our community," she said.

"They are geared not just to people in recovery but also to people needing an outlet for stress and depression under these trying circumstances," she said. "Any-

body can participate. They are fun, sober substance free events."

"The collaborations are a beautiful thing," she added. "They are all different ways to inspire recovery."

Among the volunteers at Ross Farm last Saturday were Jim and Lesli Lamca of Bridgewater, along with daughter Hayley, 16.

"This is our first time vol-

unteering here," Lesli Lamca said, noting that Hayley had previously participated in an art program offered by CIC. "It's a change to meet new people and give back."

Anyone interested in participating in any of the Community in Connection programs can contact Musgrove for more information at kmusgrove@community-incrisis.org.

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