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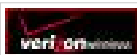
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Organic garden's growth plan

Foundation seeks to expand site donated by Walton family

By Mia Taylor

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Her eyes scan a landscape that was transformed to save her only child.

Before the diagnosis, there was a small garden and playground on the hillside in National City where Christy Walton now stands.

Then a spot appeared on 4-year-old Luke Walton's lung. His cancer had returned despite a long series of chemotherapy and radiation. And even with continued chemotherapy, doctors gave Luke only a one-in-six chance of survival.

At that point, Christy Walton decided it was time for a new approach to save her frail son, who'd barely gained any weight or grown during a year of battling a stage IV Wilms tumor. He would eat nothing but organic food, and Walton set about making that possible.

Now those efforts are benefiting residents and organizations across the county, including UCSD's Moores Cancer Center in La Jolla.

Walton decided the family's playground had to go. In its place is a half-acre garden with rows offering a variety of organic fruits and vegetables, including three types of lettuce, broccoli, snow peas, turnips, beets, spinach, tomatoes, onions, leeks and green beans.

"I was giving Luke six glasses of juice daily – fruit or carrot. We would get organic pasta. I removed red meat and pork altogether, made my own mustard, mayo. This was 20 years ago when you could not go buy fresh carrot juice like you can now," Walton said during a rare return visit to the home where she and her family lived from 1986 to 2005. "In five months, Luke's tumor was gone. I attribute that to a complete nutrition change."

While medical research has not established a solid link between organic food and defeating cancer or preventing its recurrence, fruits and



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A group of cancer survivors and supporters lined up to enjoy a healthy lunch of grilled chicken and grilled salmon prepared at an organic garden at the former National City home of Christy Walton. Walton is the widow of the late Wal-Mart heir John Walton.



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Susan Faerber, of the Healing Foods Kitchen at UCSD's Moores Cancer Center in La Jolla, taught the group how to grill chicken, salmon and fresh vegetables.

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vegetables have been proven to have numerous health benefits, including when dealing with cancer, diabetes and obesity.

“Many studies have found that eating the recommended five servings or more of fruits and vegetables daily reduced the risk for breast cancer and improved the prognosis in such patients,” said Cheryl Rock, a professor at the Moores UCSD Cancer Prevention and Control Program.

Rock said the No. 1 recommendation of the American Cancer Society for preventing cancer and repeat cancer occurrences, in terms of diet, is eating more fruits and vegetables, more whole grains and less meat.

Such health benefits are the inspiration behind another expansion of the garden that Walton started years ago. But this time, the beneficiaries are spread across the county.

In 2006, Walton, widow of the late Wal-Mart heir John Walton, bequeathed her National City home to the nonprofit International Community Foundation.

The foundation recently hosted a luncheon on the property to raise awareness about the garden and generate funds for a planned 1-acre expansion.

With Walton, who is ranked 26th on the 2008 *Forbes* list of world billionaires, as the marquee speaker, a variety of San Diego's movers and shakers arrived to stroll the grounds. As chickens wandered past their feet and butterflies skittered through the air, Walton bounded up one row and down another explaining the garden's history.

“My whole philosophy on this garden is that it isn't just about cancer, it's about the food we eat,” Walton said. “We are turning ourselves away from nature.”

Foundation President Richard Kiy is developing ways to reverse that trend. He envisions the garden becoming a classroom where children, families and senior citizens learn about healthy eating and living. He is particularly motivated by statistics showing that the 79th Assembly District – which includes Coronado, Imperial Beach, National City, the western portion of Chula Vista and southern San Diego – has a 33.4 percent obesity rate.

Kiy said the obesity rate is a good indicator of people who are at risk of contracting adult-onset, or Type 2, diabetes; maintaining a healthy diet plays a tremendous role in preventing that form of the disease.

“Our foundation is doing more and more with chronic disease and diabetes, and we have a great opportunity with this garden,” Kiy said. “We'd like to develop it into a community garden.”

Kiy has begun talks with the Whittier Institute for Diabetes in La Jolla and the Chula Vista-based Los Niños International about sharing in the expanded garden. Los Niños has been working in the border region for 30 years to educate the community about nutrition and ecology.

“Our hope is we would have children's groups from the area, elementary schools, the Boys & Girls Club in National City, working on a garden and learning all there is to know about good nutrition and diet,” said Elisa Sabatini, executive director of Los Niños.

Meanwhile, produce from the garden is being used by one San Diego program.

Each week, a shipment of fruits and vegetables from the garden arrives at UCSD's Moores Cancer Center in La Jolla to be used in cooking classes at the Healing Foods Kitchen.

On a recent evening, Susan Faerber, who leads the free classes, had a small fortune's worth of produce from the garden spread before her. The

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evening's menu consisted of pomegranate soup, spinach with garbanzo beans and chicken sautéed with strawberry and rhubarb.

"I easily use \$20 worth of mint from the garden in a single class," Faerber said. "The quality of the produce is fantastic and I try to show that healthy food can taste good and is good for you."

While knowledge about organic produce evolves, Kiy and Walton continue to plan ways to maximize use of the garden.

"I would really like to see something like the Healing Foods Kitchen in the South Bay teaching nutrition," Walton said. "And I love the idea of children being able to come through the garden and pick something and eat it."

■ Mia Taylor is a freelance writer based in San Diego.

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