

Harvest the North celebrates first community harvest



By Jim Eadie

Bancroft's Riverside Park has seen changes over the past few years making it the 'go to' place in the heart of the town for local citizens as well as tourists. This summer, a new project has taken root, which is hoped to make the park an even more important community rallying point.

Harvest the North is a community garden collaboration inspired by North Hastings Community Trust (NHCT), which has seen beautiful raised beds built in several locations in the park for growing vegetables. NHCT is an anti-poverty agency responding to the impacts of poverty in the community.

On Aug. 18, supporters and volunteers of the project gathered at the gardens to celebrate their accomplishments so far.

'There is a growing need for access to healthy local food,' said Jane Kali, program coordinator for NHCT.

'More and more of us are falling through the cracks. People don't want to be on the receiving end ... we have to reduce that stigma. Low income impacts a whole range of people, including small business owners, small farmers, and artists. People are forced to make uncomfortable choices - do I pay the electricity bill, or feed my family? Do I feed my family, or pay the rent?'

The community garden concept for Kali means more than just a few vegetables grown in the park, and the important conversations that might stimulate. She visualizes community gardens all over Bancroft and North Hastings growing food for people, even creating employment.

'We do need jobs where we are not destroying ourselves,' she said.

Critical to the success of the initiative, is community collaboration. Harvest the North has an impressive list of partners and supporters including small businesses, local and provincial government, individuals, libraries, musicians and artists, healthcare and social service providers.

'We see this as an opportunity to bring lots of people together in ways that will beautify our town, enhance ownership and pride of place, increase safety for everyone, and make healthy food accessible,' said Kali.

Volunteers have tended the gardens in the park with obvious pride and care. Vegetables ranging from tomatoes to kale, and eggplant to corn, now ripening is promising a bountiful harvest for year one.

Kali remembers the day early in the spring when the donated building materials for the raised beds were delivered to the park. 'A whole group of students were going by, and we called them over,' she said.

'It was during their exams, but they went home, changed their clothes and came back - and they did most of the work! Even tourists came along, and whole families picked up shovels and got the wheelbarrow to help us! It was beautiful, and makes me very hopeful.'