

Annual Farm to Table Event Being Held at the VSDB Educational Urban Farm

by Cammie Tutwiler, SVEC Writer

On Aug. 11, the Virginia School for the Deaf and the Blind (VSDB) in Staunton will showcase its Cooperation, Respect, Opportunity, Perseverance and Skills (CROPS) program at the fourth Annual Farm to Table Event being held at the VSDB Educational Urban Farm.

The event will feature many locally sourced items, including chicken, eggs, pork, beef, dairy products, olive oil and beverages.

“It began as a way to bring the community in to show them the farm and share more information about VSDB,” VSDB Foundation Event Coordinator Susie Miller said. “People knew the school was there, but not what we do.”

She said there are many parts of the students’ skills that visitors will learn about at the Farm to Table Event. “We want the student to not just look at the plant, but actually go through the process so they can go in a greenhouse and work at a farm,” Miller said.

For example, she noted, there are many things wrapped into the CROPS program, including learning what the farm equipment does, and what kind of tools they are working with, in addition to how to operate a business by selling a seedling to a farm, leading to workforce development skills.

“We will talk about all of these things at the Farm to Table Event. We want visitors to see all aspects of it, the way it is all interconnected together, and providing opportunities for students,” Miller said.

THE CROPS Program

The CROPS program started approximately seven years ago with the mission to “develop the students’ abilities to make connections between the natural world, their community and themselves.” The VSDB utilizes a greenhouse-based and urban-farm educational program, a sensory garden, a student-run garden business, job training and civic projects to achieve this mission.

Miller said the Allegheny Mountain Institute (AMI), an educational non-profit organization seeking to cultivate healthy



VSDB PHOTOGRAPHY CLASS PHOTOS

communities through food and education, partnered with the VSDB about establishing a one-acre urban farm. Through community workshops and student involvement, it was a true collaborative effort. The AMI funded and operated the program from 2014-2017, and then in January of 2018 the VSDB Foundation assumed full funding for the program and the VSDB, itself, took over full operations. In addition, the VSDB continues to collaborate with AMI and serves as an AMI fellowship site.

On the upper campus of the school there are 13 raised beds and a greenhouse. The lower campus features the now three-acre urban farm, and has a riparian buffer to help filter storm water from Lewis Creek. The CROPS program integrates all aspects of education, including art, English, health and nutrition, history, math, physical education, science, social studies and workforce skill development. VSDB horticulturists design lesson plans that teach about planting and the science behind it. For example, a lesson plan focused on the planting and growing of spaghetti squash would include a discussion of the genus of the plant (science); the texture, color and shape of the vegetable that may result in students making an artistic representation of the vegetable (art); the growth process and nutrients that the plant provides (health and nutrition); garden-plot design (math);

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and in conclusion, written summaries that outline the overall planting and growth process (English).

“Then, once the squash is ready, they would take it to the dining hall and the staff would prepare different dishes with the squash,” Miller said. “Students would then vote about which they liked the best.”

The experience exposes students to a wider variety of vegetables and increases their awareness of healthy food choices. Many parents have commented that students come home teaching parents about eating healthier and are actually cooking dishes at home that they have learned to cook at school, such as kale chips.

“It is because of the program,” Miller said. “Students have an investment in growing the food.”

THE VSDB

The idea of an urban garden may seem to be a new concept; the idea of participating in this type of activity has long been in place at the Virginia School for the Deaf and the Blind.

The VSDB is one of the oldest schools in Virginia, and the second of its kind in the nation. It was established by an act of the Virginia General Assembly on March 31,



Event Information

Aug. 11, 2018 • 5 p.m.

VSDB Educational Urban Farm
(113 New Hope Road)

*Proceeds will benefit the
VSDB Foundation Urban Farm*

Featuring vegetables from the
Urban Farm and all local ingredients
Prepared by chef Mike Lund

Live Music by VS

*Tickets may be purchased at
Young True Value in Staunton;
on the website vsdbfoundation.org;
or by email to
vsdbfoundation@gmail.com.*

1838, and had its first student enrollment on Nov. 15, 1839.

“The VSDB was started in 1839 and up until the mid-1980s, they had upward of 700 students,” Miller said. “They had a full-scale garden, and produced their own food and dairy products. Then in the mid-1970s the special education laws changed and students with special needs were integrated back into the public schools.”

However, more than 170 years later, the Virginia School for the Deaf and the Blind continues to be the center of expertise in the field of educating students with sensory impairments.

At the end of the 2017-'18 school year, the VSDB had approximately 100 students, who can either enroll as day students or residential students. Residential students are on campus from Sunday evening through Friday at noon, when they are transported home for the weekend.

One of the more important things, Miller said, is to teach the students how to live independently. The VSDB has the only Independent Living Apartment (ILA) program for high school students in the commonwealth on its campus. The ILAs

allow students to experience and learn how to live independently as part of each student's transition-skill development. The ILA experience includes doing day-to-day tasks independently, including cleaning, laundry and the logistics of establishing utilities and understanding lease agreements. The ILA experience boosts the students' confidence in their ability to live independently and supports successful transition into the community after graduation.

“The farm is an opportunity for students to learn about nutrition, healthy food choices, and to learn workforce development skills that they can take to their hometowns to become more employable over time,” Miller said. “Other schools have the beginnings of a program like VSDB, but nothing as full-scale as what is offered here, especially for students who are blind, deaf, deafblind or have multiple disability issues. These students can do anything. Their vision or hearing loss does not impair them from doing things that we enjoy. They are taught differently, and that's all there is to it.”



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