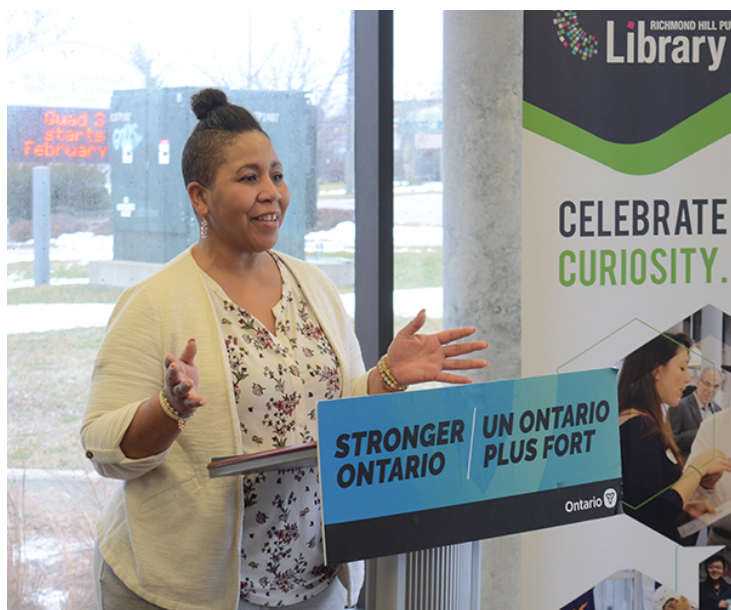


Garden to Table project will enhance skill building for seniors



Food is a powerful unifying factor and, when cooked up just right, it can also be a learning tool and a way to combat isolation.

This is the view of the York Region Food Network (YRFN), an Aurora-based group which aims to highlight food insecurity and sustainability issues and solutions, as they continue to develop their Garden to Table project.

Designed to offer gardening, cooking and art workshops that will enhance skill building and reduce isolation for seniors, the program received a boost from the Ontario Government last week through a \$24,610 grant to develop 15 interactive workshops to 250 participants aged 55 and over within the community.

Awarded through the Seniors Community Grant program, the YRFN, and fellow recipients the Canadian Senior Cooperation Association, Playforever, and the Toronto Asian Art Museum, were recognized on Thursday by Raymond Cho, Ontario's Minister for Seniors and Accessibility, and Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill MPP Michael Parsa.

"I'm so pleased to be here to celebrate this major investment from our government," said Parsa, who hosted the event at the Oak Ridges branch of the Richmond Hill Public Library. "Social isolation is a significant issue in senior communities across our province, and the seniors in my riding are not exempt. The seniors in our communities are our moms, dads, grandmothers, grandfathers, the people who shaped us into who we are, and they deserve the best services when it is our turn to take care of them."

From the perspective of YRFN Chef Maxine Knight, food is a "great connector" and "starting point" to reducing that isolation.

"It's a great starting point and a great meeting point that people can come together with commonality and then we can learn and grow from each other," said Knight. "From there, we're introducing food in multiple ways. We're introducing them to food with our community garden as well as through different mediums of art [including] where people get to explore creating their own vessels (in pottery), prepare some food that goes into the vessels, as well as what does healthy eating mean to you and your diverse cultural backgrounds, as well as specifically being here in York Region"

"We have so much access to fresh, local food and the opportunity to grow our own as well as to reach out to some of our local farms. With all that in mind, we wanted to provide multiple environments for people to connect around something we all get excited about, as well as introducing just the opportunities that exist, while creating stronger friendships that have already been building and

started? Food gets everyone excited, so we have a good starting point, and from there we have the opportunity to learn from each other, to share, and we also wanted to open up an intergenerational piece where seniors and folks from our community and gardens can mentor, share and learn from one another.?

When it comes to seniors, she added, once you connect you become a part of their family and any time you can get to know them and ?hear their wisdom? is a ?beautiful blessing for us all.?

The Garden to Table project isn't the only exciting program being cooked up by the York Region Food Network.

This spring, putting their professional kitchen on Industrial Parkway South to good use and taking advantage of their access to fresh produce, the York Region Food Network will launch a catering service.

A fundraising initiative, YRFN Executive Director Kate Greavette says demand for such a service throughout the pandemic thus far, and particularly in the last year, has ?skyrocketed.?

?We find from our community meal side of things, we're serving upwards of 200 breakfasts every Tuesday and then there's the demand for all our cooking classes,? said Greavette. ?All of those programs that bring people together are just such highs and catering is a great initiative to get funds into the organization so we can put it back into the programs and make sure we're able to meet demand.?

Knight added that the food they use in their catering program will be locally sourced as much as possible, with an accessible menu that can accommodate diverse dietary needs.

For more information about the York Region Food Network and its initiatives, visit yrfn.ca.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter