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Contact: Allessandra Kummelehne  
akummelehne@prairiestate.edu

WILL COUNTY FOOD FOR ALL FOR HEALTHIER COMMUNITIES INITIATIVE SELECTS LEWIS UNIVERSITY SOPHOMORE TO DESIGN AND INSTALL COMMUNITY GARDEN AT NATIONAL HOOK UP FOR BLACK WOMEN

On April 30, Katie Ewing, sophomore at Lewis University in Romeoville was notified her submission for the garden design and install project; at the National Hook Up For Black Women Joliet Chapter, located at 1705 S. Richard Street in Joliet, was accepted by the Food for All for Healthier Communities Initiative. The garden site is on a seven-acre tract of land owned by the Laraway School District 70C. It’s leased to the Joliet Chapter of the National Hookup of Black Women (NHBW). The site is located in the 60433 zip code which is classified as a “food desert.”

As the selected project, Ms. Ewing will install her design, which includes 23 raised beds for herbs, fruits and vegetables, a pollinator garden and children’s activity garden, will be installed with her selected build crew in sections throughout the month of May. The finished garden is expected to be completed by June 6.

According to Ms. Ewing, she sees this project as “A way to help the community and to bring beauty to the earth.” Ms. Ewing wishes “to make it possible for everybody to have access to fresh fruits and vegetables that they can afford.” While making it possible to access affordable foods, Ms. Ewing hopes to “provide a healthy learning experience for kids that visit the children’s garden and include a way for the kids to learn how to garden, as well as ways to participate in fun, physical activities to burn off some energy and promote health.”

“It is vital for students to be actively engaged in our local communities and this project exemplifies our commitment to address food insecurity issues in our area,” says John Lerczak, Director of Sustainability and Facilities Administration at Lewis University, who worked closely with Ms. Ewing as she prepared her submission.

As a result of the challenges to the local food system in Will County brought to light by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Food for All for Healthier Communities Initiative was launched to identify working solutions to the food crisis Will County faces. The following partners have been identified and engaged to ensure success of the program: Will County MAPP Collaborative, Will County Land Use Department, Will County Farm Bureau, the South Metropolitan Higher Education Consortium, Greater Joliet Area YMCA, National Hook Up of Black Women Joliet Chapter, and Illinois Partners in Hope. Through a coordinated effort, these partners seek to develop and expand all aspects needed to support an economically strong local food system, including the following elements: food production, distribution and aggregation, processing, marketing, purchasing, preparation and consumption, and resource and waste recovery.

“Providing our students a local opportunity to be part of the solution is pivotal,” SMHEC executive director Allessandra Kummelehne says. “Real-world projects which focus on overcoming social inequities in our own backyard can empower students to become the change-agents we so desperately need.
“Resourcefulness stems from necessity,” Program Manager and Coordinator of the We WILL Grow School and Community Garden Program Kathy Pecora says, “It took a global pandemic to amplify the voices of those most impacted by generational inequities, prompting innovative solutions to end food apartheid and bring health, opportunity and hope to underserved Will County communities.”

As an active partner in the Food for All for Healthier Communities Initiative, SMHEC looks forward to expanding these real-world projects in the next academic year by engaging faculty and students in a semester-long project. Through this engagement, the Consortium hopes to see more students engaged in their local communities and the potential for new curriculum development to support the local food system.

Additionally, through this initiative, SMHEC member institutions are well poised to adopt Good Food Purchasing Policies. These policies would create a market and demand for local food thus growing the Will County food system.

**About The South Metropolitan Higher Education Consortium (SMHEC)**

SMHEC is a unique partnership between two-year and four-year, public, private and for-profit higher education institutions in the south metropolitan area, extending south from the city of Chicago to the western border of Joliet, the southern border of Kankakee and east to the Illinois-Indiana state line. The mission of the Consortium is for its members to collaborate to enhance educational services and programs in the region.

For more information, please contact Allessandra Kummelehne at akummelehne@prairiestate.edu.