

## **Carmen and Jorge Guaigua**

Attached to a chain-link fence is a sign that reads, “Welcome to the Garden at Hamilton Elementary.” Stepping through a gate are numerous raised beds filled with vegetables, herbs and flowers. Colorful hand-painted signs identify what is planted.

Rosemary is thriving; pumpkins are taking shape; cherry tomatoes are turning red; orange and chocolate mint is ready for picking. Other vegetables and herbs are carefully tended. The garden is a project of The Edible Classroom, a non-profit organization that partners with schools and communities to create and sustain learning gardens where children, families, and communities engage with nutritious food from seed to table.

Angie Martin is the director of community engagement. “Our past season was all about farm to fork and understanding our food systems and why eating local food when possible is so important.”

“We have found that even though we live in a county with a deep agricultural heritage, many students still are not familiar with where their food actually comes from. We love educating students on how to grow their own food from seed to table.”

According to their website, “The Edible Classroom cultivates academic achievement, healthy lifestyles, and environmental stewardship through garden-based, experiential learning.”

The website also includes research and evidence that supports the use of youth gardens as a beneficial teaching tool. Among a list of numerous benefits of school gardens is that they provide opportunities for interdisciplinary lessons.

One way the organization educates students is through a series of summer camps. And, one student that made a connection to the garden and food is Jorge Guaigua.

Jorge is on the Autism spectrum but made a connection to the garden at a recent summer camp.

Carmen Guaigua is Jorge’s mother. She was looking for camps that Jorge could attend but no one would accept him due to his diagnosis because they did not have appropriate staffing.

“I understood this,” Guaigua said. “But I wanted him to be inclusive, as all kids should be, regardless of disability. Jorge has learned so much and has tried foods that, typically at home, he doesn't.”

With a laugh, Guaigua relates that Jorge and his twin sister who attended camp with him, will try foods at home but remind her that it’s not the way they did it at camp.

Guaigua is from Ecuador where her mother-in-law milks cows and makes cheese. The family traveled to Ecuador and if you wanted an egg, you went and gathered eggs from the nest. She had beans growing and made bean soup.

These things did not go un-noticed by Jorge.

“He really loved the animals and cows. He wanted to learn about the animals and then the vegetables and fruits,” Guaigua said.

“As Jorge got older, he started to see the foods, like carrots. He was able to learn. He is hands-on. Now, he wants to see what he's eating. I used to hide the vegetables in soups.”

Guaigua believes it's part of a sensory experience. “He likes munching on the celery and carrots. He loves the crunch.”

“I am so grateful to The Edible Classroom because they gave him an opportunity to be part of their camp.”

Guaigua and her children walked among the raised beds at Hamilton Elementary. They had heard that pumpkins were growing in a bed and they wanted to see the progress. They meandered among beds of carrots, herbs and flowers but couldn't find the pumpkins. Finally, at one end of the garden, they found vines with a few blossoms and tucked underneath were small pumpkins — a pale orange / yellow.

It was another food success story.