

GREENFIELD

Gardeners help homeless in Energy Park

By ANITA FRITZ
Staff Writer

GREENFIELD — A group of volunteers who have been gardening in Energy Park, some for more than a decade, have formed bonds they never expected with the homeless men and women who spend time there every day.

The gardeners have been bringing them water, fruit and garbage bags, and one nonprofit has installed a needle box that is emptied regularly.

Volunteer gardener Wisty Rorabacher said she's been noticing an increase in people who are homeless and others hanging out in the park over the past few years.

"It hasn't been negative, necessarily, but we did notice there were plants that were being stepped on and trash being left, and even human waste in some areas," she said. "I was concerned about working there after COVID-19 hit because I didn't

want to come in contact with anything that might be contaminated."

But, Rorabacher said, one day this spring when she was there, she approached a group of about nine people to talk with them about those issues.

"They were so receptive," she said. "They didn't want to hang out or sleep — some sleep there — in an area that was in that condition. They offered to help us with the gardening but also offered to clean things up, saying they just didn't have the supplies."

So, Rorabacher and others, including Precinct 3 City Councilor Virginia "Ginny" DeSorgher, brought them brooms, garbage bags and other cleaning supplies.

"They've been doing a good job," she said.

"I would love to see everyone love everyone who spends time in the park," DeSorgher said. "These are lovely people, and they're very grateful for the help they're receiving. Yes,

there are people spending a lot of time there. They're not on the common like they were a couple years ago. They're in one of our parks, and everyone has the right to be in our parks."

Christy Moore, director of the Greenfield Recreation Department, said no one has set up a tent in the park at the end of Miles Street.

"These are human beings," Moore said. "If they're not bothering anyone, there's no problem with them being there. We need to treat everyone with kindness and help each other during the pandemic."

That's exactly what the city is doing. It delivered a Porta Potty and a hand-washing station there recently, so that those spending many hours there can stay clean, Moore said, while they social distance. The city and volunteers are also looking for people to donate masks — some have already been dropped off.



STAFF PHOTO/PAUL FRANZ

Gwyn Covington, left, who is homeless, helps thin the overgrown gardens at the Energy Park with Wisty Rorabacher on Friday afternoon.

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"We're not holding any events there this year, so anyone who would like to spend time there is fine by us, as long as they're being appropriate. Everyone is allowed to spend time in all of our parks," Moore said.

"We were happy to help with this effort to make the Energy Park more usable to those who are using the park, especially during this unique time where we're all trying to be outside but more safely," Mayor Roxann Wedegartner said. "Ginny DeSorgher and Wisty Rorabacher and the group of other citizen volunteers who've been engaging with people in the park to help in the gardens and to provide them with bottled water during these hot days deserve a big thank you. I'm grateful

that they've taken the lead in helping out."

DeSorgher said volunteers take turns every day bringing between 10 and 30 people bottles of water, snacks and more at their own expense. She said people have had conversations with many of them.

"There were probably thousands of cigarette butts on the ground at one point, and there are very few now," she said. "We provide them with trash bags and they're filling them, and they're being removed each week."

DeSorgher and Moore both said they are happy people have an opportunity to be outside, especially during the pandemic.

"They don't want to live in a shelter right now, but I'm sure that will change later this year, if they're still homeless, so some of us have contacted social services agencies to prepare them for the need for help," DeSorgher said.

She said Tapestry Health is the agency providing and emptying the needle box.

"Police stop down regularly and move people along if groups get too big, and they have been nothing but nice," DeSorgher added.

She said people hanging out there have told her they take advantage of community meals, so volunteers haven't had to feed them.

"I wish we had more resources for them," Moore said. "We're doing what we can."

"I've heard some heart-breaking stories, but I also heard an uplifting one recently that gives hope to all," DeSorgher said. "One of the men told me he used to be homeless, but he got himself out of it and now owns a small business. He goes there every Friday with pizza to feed the people in the park."

DeSorgher and Moore don't know of any complaints

about the people being there.

"Parents tend to take their kids to other parks that have play structures, so that might be part of the reason," DeSorgher said. "No one is bothering anyone."

Rorabacher said she has asked some of the people who hang out in the park what they like about it.

"They said they love the signs and the plants," she said. "They are so appreciative of anything we do. They want to help us. We want to help them. They love this place."

Rorabacher said the people spending their time in Energy Park reveal the much bigger problem of homelessness that all communities should be working to resolve. By contrast, cleaning the park has been a much easier task.

"We all need to look at this through a different lens," she said. "These people are part of our community. One of the



STAFF PHOTO/PAUL FRANZ

Linda Smith, Ardi Keim and Jeri Case thin the overgrown gardens at Energy Park on Friday afternoon as people hang out on the stage.

saddest stories I heard from a woman named Marie was that they are thrilled we're reaching out to them, talking with them, but that they are embarrassed because they notice

that people try to avoid them when they come through the park."

Reach Anita Fritz at 413-772-9591 or afritz@recorder.com.