

## Program helps at-risk families bond by raising food

### Hanley Farm crops help families eat healthful foods and learn new life skills

By John Darling  
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At-risk families are learning how to rebuild their lives through the simple ritual of growing and cooking nutritious food, thanks to a new program offered by the Family Nurturing Center.

Dozens of families, many of whom have struggled with drug addiction, are learning how to grow and cook vegetables at Hanley Farm in the Healthy Food, Healthy Families program. At the same time, they're creating a social network among other families working toward the same goals.

"We cook healthy meals, enjoy the open air, with vegetables all from the farm," says Doug Lofdahl, director of the food program. "The main skill is how to work with good, healthy, organic ingredients. It's very tricky on a low income. A lot is in how you shop. The group gets to know each other and learn to buy in bulk, which is much cheaper."

The program also puts the historic Hanley Farm in Central Point to work as a true living farm.

On a recent evening, some 30 parents and children spread out heirloom tomatoes, greens, garlic and other veggies from the two-acre Hanley garden and began the job of dicing them for pasta sauce. Other kids built tents or romped around with the chickens, donkeys and peacocks who live at Hanley. They will eat family-style, then take home bountiful leftovers for the week.

Mothers attend a moms' class and fathers go to a dads' class, says parent Crispin O'Dell of Medford, adding they pick up cooking tips, learn how to include kids in cooking and do problem-solving around such issues as having a hard time with a child.

"It's a good way to bond with the children and get to play with them," says O'Dell, who has become an assistant teacher. "Kids love the farm and learn to eat and like vegetables — some they never have seen before. We work the garden till 11 in the morning. It gets us closer together, instead of being home watching TV — and it's fun to be with other families."

His wife, Cameo, notes that Lofdahl teaches parents how to identify veggies, make crockpot dishes that stretch beyond one meal and to disguise veggies that children might not find attractive.

The food program was funded with a one-year, \$14,000 grant from the local Leightman Maxey Foundation, which has a focus on teaching nutrition for individual self-reliance, says Lofdahl. Family Nurturing Center is applying for next year, too.

Mom DeAnn Lutton of Medford says the Family Nurturing Center "changed my life and gave me stability, and a lot of important personal changes. I so look forward to interacting with the other moms and children. There's day care for some respite and three hours where I can dress up and hit the pavement, doing job interviews."

Mom of twins, Heather Thomas of Medford says, "It's changed my life so immensely with resources and connections to other parents and positive ways to think. My boys have flourished in behavior, speech, motor and social skills and also get empathy training."

The education of children in life skills is a constant. A young girl ran up to Lofdahl, crying and saying she was locked in the bathroom but after a minute, figured out the doorknob. He took her hands and reassured her. "You did it, you were smart, you were strong and you opened it," he said. The girl soon repeated the phrases and started smiling, then ran off.

Physician Kerri Hecox, a board member of the Family Nurturing Center and of the Southern Oregon Historical Society, which owns Hanley Farm, called the food program "fantastic."

Hecox says it's therapeutic in bringing high-risk families together, providing unstructured family time and for rebuilding families who've been through drug crises and had their children in foster care.

"I call them 'at promise' families, instead of 'at-risk,'" says Mary-Curtis Gramley, executive director of the Family Nurturing Center. "We support the family as they begin to look at more healthy and efficient ways of getting nutritious meals. It's hard on a very limited income to buy healthy food and prepare it."

The focus, Gramley adds, is on mentoring parent-child relationships in a natural setting.

"It's a very wise approach and it changes the way they parent," she says. "It's an amazingly positive addition to our regular programs."

The program brings hands-on, life-enriching survival skills in the field, says Lofdahl.

"The impetus came from our home visits, where we saw people struggling to get enough food for the family," he says. "I learned the skills from my dad, on our farm. He was in the Dust Bowl in Nebraska, but they came through and always had enough food because they had the traditional skills, even if they didn't have enough money. I decided to teach that."

Lofdahl connected with the Historical Society, which has been demonstrating pioneer skills at Hanley Farm for years.

"We meshed really well. We're doing this here all year around. After the harvest comes mulching, with composting in spring, then transplanting starts."

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## **If you go**

What: Family Nurturing Center's second annual Magic Hours Gala fundraiser

When: 7 to 10 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 5

Where: Imperial Ballroom, 40 N. Front St., Medford

Tickets: \$75 each, \$100 a couple

Reservations: 541-779-5242 or [familynurturingcenter.org](http://familynurturingcenter.org)