

Venice – A chance for growth

Community garden recognized

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"Don't step on the tomatoes!" David Stoecklin shouted as he laughed when Warren Ribley arrived at the Venice Community Garden on Friday.

Ribley, director of the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, came to the site to recognize Workforce Development Week and high-light workforce program in the Metro East.

Stoecklin is executive director of Madison County Government Employment and Training Department, which administers the local program.

Now in its second year, the Gardens of Venice project is aimed at beautifying an area that until a couple of years ago was an ugly, overgrown parcel.

"It was a typical abandoned lot," said Rae Liening, project manager for the garden. "There were several lots in the area that were demolished or not maintained."

Stoecklin said the young people who worked on the project learned valuable skills.

Alexis Coburn and Shaquita Fields, both of Venice, were among those who worked on transforming the lot at Kerr and Ashbrook streets this summer.

"We planted vegetables," Coburn said, "Peppers, bell peppers."

Fields chimed in, "Squash, pumpkins, greens."

Working in the heat and fighting off insects did not deter the two.

"It's fun to know how to grow stuff now," Coburn said.

Fields thought of the future and half-kiddingly said, "Maybe it will be as big and beautiful as the Botanical Garden."

Ribley said the program was made possible by federal stimulus funds and administered through the Summer Youth Program. Through the program, Ribley said, people age 18-24 "are placed in meaningful employment where they can develop skills."

In addition to working on the garden, the two were also part of a group that picked and delivered vegetables to the local senior citizen center among other places.

"This gave them a chance to reconnect with the community," Stoecklin said during a brief ceremony in the park.

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Madison County Board Chairman Alan J. Dunstan (D-Troy) had the last words as the group was breaking out.

Looking to Coburn and Fields, he said, "I like sweet corn. Can I still get my order in?"