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Working for the greater good

By Sally Pollak, Free Press Staff Writer

Maria and Sam Church knelt in a farm field Saturday morning, by a big pile of butternut squash. The Burlington siblings, their friends and family, had picked the squash as part of a fundraising effort for The Schoolhouse, a private elementary school in South Burlington that the Churches attend.

In a twist on the kind of school fundraising that many families are familiar with — wrapping paper sales and silent auctions — The Schoolhouse project raises money for the school's scholarship fund while helping to get healthy, local foods to people in and around Burlington.

Schoolhouse families, who volunteered Saturday at the Intervale's Healthy City Youth Farm, raised money to support their farm labor. The money, which was solicited the way people generate funds for a walkathon, goes to the school. The work helps a farm that employs teenagers in the summer and relies on volunteers in the spring and fall. The results of the labor — a bountiful harvest of squash, eggplants, peppers and carrots — ensure that fresh-from-the-farm produce gets distributed throughout the community.

The butternut squash that nearly overflowed from the back of a pickup truck was bound for the Chittenden Emergency Food Shelf, where people who are in need can get food.

"I think it's cool," Maria Church, 8, said. "I think it's really nice to help people who can't afford food."

Sam, 7, said he was picking through the squash looking for rotten ones. He found one and used it to play catch with a friend, the bulbous bronze vegetable looking something like a football on a cloudy fall morning.

"I like picking it," Sam said. "Cause I could also play with my friends here."

And so it was that food, friendship and community came together in a tangle of dried squash vines — exactly what parent Alison Cannon and other organizers had in mind when they conceived the fundraiser.

In considering what organization Schoolhouse families would volunteer for, the issue of access to healthy foods, especially with rising costs of groceries, was deemed important, Cannon said.

"We felt like it was timely in that sense and a really clear way to give back to the larger community," she said.

The effort also raises awareness about the school, which has 49 students in grades K-6, and lets people know about a Burlington farm, Healthy City Youth Farm, that teaches teens about farming and food (while paying them), and distributes organic produce to a variety of recipients, including: CSA members; the Burlington School District; Fletcher Allen Health Care and the food shelf.

The butternut squash was gleaned from a field that's farmed by the Intervale Community Farm. The vegetables were blemished and wouldn't store well, but were fine for eating now, Healthy City farm manager Jen Miller said.

About 40 people — adults and children — worked for Healthy City on Saturday, making it the largest volunteer group of the season, Miller, 26, said.

"It's an amazing chunk of work," she said. "It's also part of our mission: To educate people about food and where it comes from and getting it where it needs to go. In this case, glean it and get it out of the field and to the food shelf. And reconnect people to their food and their community."

The Muzzy family of Burlington, who have two daughters at The Schoolhouse, raised more than \$250 from family and friends and gave their time Saturday morning.

Stephanie Muzzy said she felt good about asking people for money and found that those she asked were happy to donate.

"It seems good on so many levels," Muzzy said. "We're helping local farmers and the community, and at the same time supporting The Schoolhouse. I felt completely comfortable asking for money and spreading the word about the cause."

Referring to fundraisers in which students and parents try to sell products, Muzzy said: "People don't necessarily need more stuff, but just want to feel good about where their money is going and the cause that it's helping."

She recognizes, also, what the project is teaching her children about a sense of community and working for the greater good.

Muzzy's oldest daughter, Kyla, 8, has expressed interest in organizing a neighborhood food drive, with a friend, around Thanksgiving.

Kayli Carlson, 5, started kindergarten a month ago at The Schoolhouse. She carried loads of squash to the pile Saturday, saying they were "very heavy and very big."

Her mother, Amy Carlson of Colchester, noted the good in Kayli's effort. "Lots of families benefit from a little work from everybody," she said.

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