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Sylacauga Grows to dedicate garden at 'Dinner Under the Stars'

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SYLACAUGA — Sylacauga Grows community garden is planning an evening of fun and fellowship, as well as a special dedication, at an event Wednesday.

The garden, facilitated by SAFE Family Services Center, is hosting "Dinner Under the Stars" on June 26 at 7:30 p.m. Tickets are \$10 and are available at SAFE, B.B. Comer Library, Sylacauga Chamber of Commerce and Magnolia's. The event will include dinner catered by Hickory Street Café, live music and a dedication of the garden to the late Mayor Sam Wright.

"When he was mayor is when the whole concept of a community garden evolved, and he took a leadership role in bringing people together around the issue of hunger in our city," said SAFE Executive Director Margaret Morton. "Mayor Wright led an initiative to start the garden, and spent some time doing sweat equity with his wife, Connie, his family, as well as many others across the community."

A large piece of Sylacauga's white marble placed at the garden in his honor will be unveiled, as Sylacauga Grows also recognizes others who have contributed to the garden's continued growth and success.

"To use words that were coined by (Sylacauga Grows lead gardener) Bill Roberts, it's a fundraiser, not a fundraiser," Morton said. "We're going to take some time to thank folks who were instrumental in the creation and sustaining of the garden and also talk about what has been accomplished as a result of this effort."

Since the first seeds were planted five years ago by SAFE, the garden has grown from a small community undertaking. It now includes an orchard, compost pile, greenhouse, beekeeping, gardening and nutrition workshops, so



“The whole idea spawned out of the economic downturn,” Morton said, explaining that Sylacauga’s Promise Committee surveyed about 1,500 citizens who attended a job fair around 2008 about their greatest need aside from employment. “Food was overwhelmingly their greatest need,” she said.

Not only is the garden accomplishing its goal to provide fresh produce to those in need — 100 percent of the food it produces is distributed through Sylacauga Care House and local soup kitchens — it is also creating education and community service opportunities for citizens of all ages and backgrounds.

Sustained by a loyal group of volunteers, Sylacauga Grows provides plots to individuals or organizations and allows public housing residents to work off debts by putting in hours at the garden. The fruit orchard now has 88 trees, each of which was dedicated by a resident in honor of a loved one or group.

With a different crop planted every season, the community garden fed at least 325 families last year and distributed more than 1,700 pounds of produce to those in need. It hosted 20 outreach events, had 360 students participate in educational workshops and logged well over 1,000 volunteer hours from 60 volunteers.

“Dinner Under the Stars” is the first fundraiser of its type for the garden, but not the last, Morton said. Limited tickets are available and should be purchased by June 24. Contact SAFE at 256-245-4343 for more information.

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