

4th annual Plant A Row harvest celebration

BY LARISSA FUENTES

Plant A Row for the Hungry celebrated the volunteers, supporters and community partners who help provide fresh produce to local families facing food insecurity during its fourth annual Harvest Celebration on Wednesday, Aug. 19.

The event, held at the Helen Keller National Center in Port Washington, brought together volunteers and community members for an afternoon of food, music and recognition. The organization also honored the Lamberti family for 14 years of serving as a drop-off location for residents' excess produce.

Plant A Row's newly redesigned vegetable garden at the Helen Keller National Center has produced more than 1,000 pounds of vegetables, all of which are donated to local families experiencing food insecurity. The organization has expanded its distribution this year to serve more than 300 families through partnerships with Our Lady of Fatima Food Pantry and St. Peter of Alcantara Food Pantry.

"This is our fourth annual harvest party," said Pam Ollendorff, Plant A Row's executive director. "We hold it just to celebrate the volunteers and supporters. We have so many people who really make this possible."

Ollendorff, who began working with Plant A Row in July 2024, said volunteers have taken on new roles this year as the organization expanded its gardens and adopted succession planting to maximize the amount of food produced.

The organization also began working with St. Peter's Pantry in 2026, joining its longstanding partnership with Our Lady of Fatima. Together, the pantries serve about 300 families with fresh produce from Plant A Row.

Plant A Row founder, board president and "Chief Vegetable Officer" Marvin Makofsky said the program began 16 years ago after he spoke with Sister Kathy of Our Lady of Fatima about what the food pantry needed.

"I said, 'What do you not get?' We don't get fresh food," Makofsky recalled. "And I said, 'OK, we got to set up a program.'"

Makofsky, an avid gardener, created a system allowing residents to donate excess produce from their home gardens. The



PHOTO BY LARISSA FUENTES

Elected officials gathered to celebrate Plant a Row and the Lamberti family.

Lamberti family provided a key piece of that system by allowing Bayles Garden Center to serve as a drop-off point.

For 14 years, residents could bring excess produce to Bayles, where the Lamberti family received it before Plant A Row volunteers picked it up and delivered it to local food pantries. Bayles Garden Center operated for 48 years before closing.

John Lamberti accepted the recognition on behalf of his family, including his wife, Maureen.

"On behalf of my family, thanks for everything," Lamberti said. "Marv came in that day. He was, like, an idea, and my brother, like, 'All right, well, yeah, there's room in the corner. Let's see where this goes.' And then, here we are today."

The Town of North Hempstead recognized the Lamberti family on Aug. 19 with a special day of recognition for its contributions to Plant A Row and the community.

North Hempstead Town Supervisor Jennifer DeSena praised the organization's work to provide nutritious food to families in need.

"We have hungry people here," DeSena said. "Right in Port Washington, right in Manhasset. ... Giving them dignity, giving them beautiful vegetables that are healthy, that gives something to the parents, that they are able to bring home healthy food for their children."

She also credited Plant A Row with teaching residents how to garden and creating partnerships throughout the community.



PHOTO BY MARVIN MAKOFSKY

Plant a Row for the Hungry garden at the Helen Keller National Center.

"It's all about partnerships," DeSena said. "So thank you to all the partners here ... all the donors, and all the volunteers, the board members, for bringing us together, once again, to celebrate a harvest. It's like Thanksgiving in August."

Representatives from St. Peter's Pantry also thanked Plant A Row for expanding its partnership with the pantry this year.

Roxana Sienko said the fresh produce provides more than food to families who visit the pantry.

"Every fruit and vegetable you grow, gather and share, bring nourish, dignity and hope to a family facing food insecurity,"

Sienko said. "It reminds our neighbor that they are not forgotten, that their community truly cares about them."

The organization's work extends beyond growing vegetables. Plant A Row added garden educator Michaela Ben-Sorek this year to provide lessons on gardening and food production.

Ben-Sorek said she develops weekly lessons that range from basic gardening skills to more advanced topics such as seed saving and heirloom crops.

"I think that, especially being on Long Island and in Nassau County in these towns, we can kind of forget that there are

people in need," Ben-Sorek said. "I think it's really wonderful that there's a little initiative that teaches people how to grow ... but also have a streamlined process where they can give it to those people that are in need."

Plant A Row was founded in 2010 and has delivered more than 350,000 servings of fruits and vegetables to food pantries, according to information provided by the organization. Its mission is to mobilize residents to grow and distribute fresh produce while promoting sustainable practices.

The celebration also recognized the broader network of volunteers and organizations that support Plant A Row, including Helen Keller National Center, which provides the site for the garden.

Monica Godfrey-Lehrer, director of development at Helen Keller National Center, said the organization was pleased to have Plant A Row on its campus.

"We're so happy to have Plant A Row on our campus," Godfrey-Lehrer said. "We're so happy that it feeds so many people from the community, and we can't wait for the garden to expand."

For Makofsky, the celebration was ultimately about recognizing the people behind the program — from the volunteers who plant and harvest to the residents who donate produce and the organizations that distribute it.

"We wanted to do something good," Makofsky said. "So, we will be celebrating a little bit more with John and Maureen."