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Pumpkin patch sprouts support, understanding of Hospice

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MOUNT BAKER: Farmer Sal Vacca is guiding spirit behind Barkley District pumpkin project.

BY EMILY WEINER

THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

The Barkley District, which has been sprouting several commercial buildings a year, is now sprouting row after row of pumpkin plants.

It started as whimsy and grew into a fund-raising project for Whatcom Hospice Foundation, supported by local businesses, school children and Talbot Investment Co., which owns and is developing Barkley District.

Sal Vacca is the farmer (and retired employee of US WEST Communications) who is responsible for the pumpkin patch as well as a dahlia garden.

In December, Vacca was having coffee in Starbucks with his longtime friend John Arrigoni, who is the vice president for leasing and property management for the Talbot company that manages Barkley Village. Arrigoni asked Vacca what he would like to see on the empty one-acre lot at Barkley Boulevard and Woburn Street, between the Barkley Village parking lot and a not-yet-completed office building.

Vacca, who was raised on a farm in Italy, grows dahlias and other plants on the 20 acres he owns on Van Wyck Road, and is a relative of the Vacca family that for many years has sold pumpkins from a roadside stand near Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, said that he would like to see a nice crop of pumpkins.

"When we were talking about it, it was totally off the wall," Vacca said. "But he took me seriously, so I said 'You give me the corner to work in, I'll take care of the rest.'"

Choosing a recipient

Next they had to decide what to do with the pumpkins. Vacca's friend Stephanie Feeney, with whom he had worked in the Whatcom Horticultural Society, had recently used Whatcom Hospice services before she died. Vacca and Arrigoni decided to approach Whatcom Hospice Foundation about using the pumpkin patch to raise money for the organization.

Mike Kirkland, the foundation's executive director, said the project means a lot to the hospice.

"The kind of exposure and goodwill the community sees from the project, and the awareness people can obtain about what hospice is - you can't buy that," Kirkland said. "And the funds will help people with what they need at the end of life."

Hospice services help people who are facing the personal and financial crisis of terminal illness. Kirkland said contributions recently have been used to support medical therapies, medications, training for hospice caregivers, and items for patients and their family members.

"You won't see Stephanie's name in this, but you'll certainly see Stephanie's soul," Kirkland said.

Several months before she died, gardening writer Feeney, with the help of her husband, family members and friends including

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Vacca, opened up her private garden on the shore of Lake Whatcom for a public tour to raise money for Whatcom Hospice.

"When I approached the hospice," said Vacca, "I said 'I'll take care of the work, Talbot will provide what I need, you do the publicity.' I got the fun part, the challenge of making something grow in this clay ground."

When the land had been prepared for commercial development, all of the topsoil had been scraped off.

"They had no idea they'd be growing pumpkins here," Vacca said with a grin. "When I started digging, I was wondering if we'd have to buy pumpkins. I had the soil tested, and he said basically the ground needed everything."

With lots of fertilizer and vigilance against slugs, about 1,000 pumpkin plants in 20 rows, each about 220 feet long, are thriving, although Vacca thinks the giants won't grow to much more than 400 pounds.

Businesses, kids help

Help has poured in from local businesses, including Turftenders, Barker's Woodchipping Service, LC Tractor Works, Filmore Avenue Dahlias, Sunset Postal, Windy Meadows Nursery, Cascade Sales, Cenex (Bellingham), Hardware Sales Inc., A.G. Edwards, Starbucks Coffee, Baker's Breakfast Cookies and Pastazza. Rows have been planted by Birchwood Garden Club and other groups.

In April, students from Amy Lawson's Squalicum High School biology class traveled to Windy Meadows Nursery in Ferndale to plant pumpkin seeds. In May, they transplanted the seedlings into the ground.

Kaleen Lasater, a 16-year-old 10th-grader who worked on the pumpkin project, learned about hospice from her granny.

"My poppa had to get it before he died," she said. "They came once a week."

During the last week of school, when 37 children from Geneva Elementary School came to help, Vacca, wearing a pumpkin patch T-shirt, was ready with four containers of pumpkin seeds and already furrowed rows, plus as many cookies as the kids could eat. First-graders in Jan Stamey's class and second-graders in Chris Andresen's and Linda Hershey's class traveled by school bus to the patch.

Ben Gerhart, 8, followed Vacca's instructions on how to push pumpkin seeds into the ground. His mom, Lisa Gerhart, was one of the field-trip volunteers. She said the hospice helped the family in March before her 9?-year-old daughter, Kendra, passed away.

"This is a beautiful tie-in for them," said Vacca later while the children and their teachers sang songs about pumpkins, sunny weather and gardening while waiting for the buses. "They lived through one of their classmates dying. This is a way to do something positive."

Andresen said the teachers had talked to the children about hospice, so they know that when someone is very sick, hospice is people who come and give the person special care in their home.

"It's a good lesson to them that there are organizations out there that depend on public support, or they wouldn't be there," Andresen said.

The public will have a chance to offer support by helping with the harvest and with October activities at the patch, and by making donations for cut dahlias starting in July and U-pick pumpkins in September and October. Corporate sponsors also are being sought.

Earlier this month, Fred and Lynn Berman, owners of Pastazza, a restaurant in Barkley Village, braved the mud to plant four rows of pumpkins.

"I think Sal's incredible," said Lynn Berman. "His energy is infectious. You can't help but want to get involved as soon as you meet Sal."

Information

Dahlias will be available starting in July, by donation, at the pumpkin patch at Barkley Boulevard and Woburn Street.

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Pumpkins will be available in September and October.

Activities at the pumpkin patch Oct. 6, 13 and 20 include hay rides, a pumpkin weight guessing contest, a seed spitting contest and a pygmy goat petting area.

Whatcom Hospice Foundation's Web site, <http://www.hospicehelp.org>, includes a link to Pumpkin Patch.

To buy T-shirts, or to volunteer to help the pumpkin project, contact Sal Vacca at pumpkinpatchone@aol.com or call 676-0109.

PHILIP A. DWYER

HERALD PHOTO

SEEDS OF UNDERSTANDING: Geneva Elementary School first-graders (from right) Jacob Kantorowitz, 7, Jacob Greenberg, 7, and Baylor Smith, 7, plant gourds or pumpkin seeds at the pumpkin patch on Barkley Boulevard and Woburn Street in Bellingham Wednesday morning. The pumpkin patch is a fund-raising project for Whatcom Hospice.

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