In recognition of National Hunger Awareness Day, Farmers Against Hunger and volunteers from Elijah's Promise, a soup kitchen, were on hand Thursday at Giamarese Farm in East Brunswick to pick crops for those in need of food.

E. Brunswick farm joins fight against hunger

By GENE RACZ
STAFF WRITER

EAST BRUNSWICK — With the midday sun beating down upon the fields at Giamarese Farm on Thursday, volunteers squatted among rows of plants gleaned strawberries, sugar snap peas, English peas and lettuce that had been missed on the first picking.

The concept of gathering what's left behind by reapers and giving it to the poor dates back to biblical times, organizers said, and it was an appropriate way to commemorate National Hunger Awareness Day.

Among the volunteers picking on Thursday was Lisanne Finston, executive director of Elijah's Promise soup kitchen. Along with Paul Helms — a volunteer at Elijah's Promise — they gathered several bags of produce to take directly back to their Nielsen Street facility in New Brunswick.

The harvesting event was sponsored by Farmers Against Hunger, a statewide charity organization that since 1996 has delivered more than 15 million pounds of fresh fruit and vegetables to those in need, free of charge.

"One of the realities of the (social safety) system that's being bombarded with people who are hungry and food-insecure is that perhaps the most creative solution is to go back to the basics," Finston said. "While the need is in our backyard, I think the answer is in our backyard."

"This is the solution for how we meet the expanded need in New Jersey in a win-win way," Finston added. "We support our local farmer, and we get healthy and nutritious local food into the hands of the people who need it most. And it can't get more cost-efficient and effective than this."

Paul Helms of New Brunswick, a member of AmericaCorps and volunteer at Elijah's Promise, picks snap peas.

Gathers donated produce from a network of more than 60 farms stretching from Warren to Cape May counties. It then distributes the produce at centralized locations to charity organizations.

"We can get produce from somebody's field to somebody's table for about 15 cents a pound," said Judy Grignon, program coordinator for Farmers Against Hunger, which operates about 52 weeks a year, feeding about 2,000 people a week — and more during harvest season.

"We also have about 1,000 volunteers each year and, if not for them, we would not be able to do all that we do," Grignon said.

Helms, 25-year-old who hails from Indiana, said he is completing his AmericaCorps service in sustainability and food security at Elijah's Promise.

"I was gleaned food from farms a lot last summer with Farmers Against Hunger," Helms said. "It's a great way to not only be more efficient with what our state produces to use all of it and not let any go to waste — but it's also just fun to be outside picking stuff."

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Jim Giamarese, owner of Giamarese Farm and a founding member of Farmers Against Hunger, said events like Thursday’s harvest “make people stop and think.”

“What is gleaned from the fields is perfectly edible and while it may not be perfectly shaped like you see in the grocery store, it can feed a lot of people,” said Giamarese, who likes the fact that first lady Michelle Obama has taken up the cause of fighting obesity through proper nutrition.

“It’d be neat to have her come out to New Jersey to promote this cause, and we plan on sending her an invitation,” Giamarese said.

Giamarese said he also likes seeing organizations such as Elijah’s Promise establish partnerships with places like the Earth Center at Davidson’s Mills Pond Park in North Brunswick, where a vegetable plot is being established.

Local farmers have donated eggplant, tomato and pepper plants for it.

“Farmers Against Hunger is not only gleaning, but building the growing capacity to create more sources of good local food for organizations,” Finston said. “And days like this give us an opportunity to look ahead and see how we can mobilize ourselves and make sure that next year’s picture for the needy gets better.”

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