Volunteers' effort gleans greens for county’s poor

By JENNIFER MICALE
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EAST BRUNSWICK: Still wearing his suit pants, Art Brown Jr. snapped the collard greens from their stalks like a pro.

Brown, the state's secretary of agriculture, dumped the greens into a black plastic bag held open by Jane Kenny, the commissioner of the state Department of Community Affairs. Yesterday, the two officials helped a dozen volunteers from Elijah's Promise in New Brunswick, the Middlesex County College chapter of Americorps and Farmers Against Hunger "glean the fields" at Giamarese Farm in East Brunswick to help the poor.

Gleaning, or collecting the remainder of the harvest, dates back to biblical times as a means of feeding widows and orphans, FAH director Robin McGovern explained. It is prominently featured in the Book of Ruth, where Ruth gleans the fields for grain to feed her widowed mother-in-law.

In New Jersey, volunteer gleaners collect fresh, but cosmetically flawed produce from 49 farms, which is then distributed to food banks as part of the state's Cooperative Gleaning program. In an hour-and-a-half, harvesters can collect more than 2,000 pounds of produce to feed the needy, McGovern said.

"There's highs and lows in the season," farmer Jim Giamarese explained. "There's a lot of stuff that goes to waste, and we want to see it used."

With a sweep of his hand, he indicated the rows of leafy greens.

"This could be here until Christmas, depending on the weather. I probably couldn't sell all this," he said.

N.J. Commissioner of Community Affairs Jane Kenny, left, and Secretary of Agriculture Art Brown gather collard greens to aid the poor.

See Bounty, Page B2
greens may seem like tedious work to some, Elijah’s Promise volunteer Scott Smith was eager to start.

“Anything to help, that’s what I like to do,” said the South Plainfield man.

On Sunday, Giamarese Farms will host another gleaning, which starts at 9:30 a.m. Congregation B’nai Tikvah of North Brunswick and Temple Har Sinai in Trenton will bring nearly 100 volunteers, McGovern said.

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