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9-2024

### Restoring Soil, Souls and Stories

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# Restoring Soil, Souls and Stories

Lois Lello-Burn's garden is a rainbow of colors—deep ruby, delicate coral, vibrant magenta, and creamy lavender—bobbing on a sea of green stems and leaves. There are zinnias, sweet peas and sunflowers, but mostly dahlias. *Over 2,000 dahlias.*

Lois, a resident of Berrien Springs, Michigan, and member of the Pioneer Memorial Church, planted the garden on a plot owned by Andrews University with the goal of providing a space for healing and restoration.

Known to her patients as Dr. Lello, Lois is a pediatrician at Southwestern Medical Clinic in Niles, Michigan. She has a vision for trauma-informed care, emphasizing the connection between mind, body and soul. "Restore Life, that's my motto," she says. "Restoring soil, souls and stories."

Lois has been a lover of gardens for many years, but combining her green thumb and medical knowledge is a recent development. Over the last few years, she has developed a growing conviction of the need to incorporate trauma-informed, whole-person care into her pediatric practice.

Research has shown that many chronic illnesses are rooted in traumatic events, especially those occurring during childhood.



The trauma-informed care approach is to search for the root of the symptoms by asking questions such as, “When did this begin?” and “What is your story?” as opposed to “What are your symptoms?”

After months of research and networking, Lois developed a five-year plan for transforming her practice. This would include training providers and staff in trauma-informed care, hiring a social worker who could address patients’ mental health needs, and developing a healing hub for connecting patients with community resources.

“We are one of the most depressed states in the country when it comes to what has happened post-pandemic and how it has affected us economically,” Lois says. The need for therapists and social workers in the region her clinic serves is immense, but many people wait months to be seen for mental health issues.

Her plan is still in the early stages, but Lois has begun implementing what she has learned through her research of trauma-informed care and the benefits of gardening on mental health. She draws inspiration from regenerative gardening, noting that “the first two months of our lives have a huge impact on our mental health. The first two days of a seedling’s life influence the plant’s productivity. It’s just gorgeous how God designed things to be so intricate. When we feed the soil, we harvest the benefits.” Even a seedling that is left to wilt can become productive and healthy again if it receives the proper nutrients and care.

Last spring, Lois received permission to use two vacant plots previously used by Andrews University agriculture students. She then reached out to Cheryl Hosford, a local gardener passionate about dahlias, with a request to purchase dahlia tubers for her new garden. To her surprise, Hosford gifted her dahlias: over 2,000 tubers and rooted cuttings of some 200 varieties.

After tilling the soil, trucking in nutrient-rich compost and aged manure, and laying down tarps, she planted the dahlia tubers. It took a crew of 15 people over a week to sort the tubers by color and place them in the ground. She also re-covered the greenhouse frame, which she plans to use for year-round gardening, and planted other flowers near the dahlias. The result was a thriving kaleidoscope

of colors and textures growing in neat rows—a miniature botanical garden.

Last summer, she informally piloted garden-based trauma-informed care with several patients of varying ages. Lois invited a patient suffering from depression to come to the garden even before anything was planted. The young girl was uncommunicative during her appointment, but perked up when Lois mentioned her garden. Her mother brought her to the garden “and she was so excited,” Lois remembers. “She took off her shoes and she was walking through the dirt, and it just transformed this kid ... it was like night and day ... I could just see the impact.”

Approximately 10 patients helped Lois weed and tend the garden. “A few of my patients came consistently ... and their life was, I think, transformed by the process,” she says. Some were even inspired to plant a small vegetable garden at their home and then sold vegetables they grew.

“In trauma-informed care, resilience looks like coming alongside a person who has not had [support] and teaching them how to regulate,” Lois says. “Resilience is learning the act or process of regulation.” She envisions her garden, which she named “LifeBlooms,” as a place where such resilience can develop and where “biology restores biographies.”

Lois sold dahlias at the garden, her roadside stand, a local teashop, and for weddings. This provided small funds for the garden and an opportunity to talk with people about her vision for trauma-informed care.

Lois plans to develop a space where she can teach gardening classes. She hopes to connect with schools and counselors as a local resource for therapeutic gardening, where people of all ages, but especially children, can join her in “gardening for the mind, body, and soul.” ■



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**Sarah Gane Burton** is a freelance writer based in Berrien Springs, Michigan.