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Media Release

Hands-on internships made possible even in the time of COVID

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Charleston, SC – Charleston County School District (CCSD) students participated in a paid internship program this summer. The Green Heart Project was able to provide this work-based learning opportunity, live and in-person, despite COVID-19 through their inaugural Youth Internship Program.

The Green Heart Program hired a total of eight young people in an effort to develop career preparedness and healthy living skills and promote engaged citizenship through urban farming. CCSD students that participated included Will Brown (rising 11th grader at Academic Magnet High School), Z Dunigan (James Island Charter High School graduate), Jayvon Ford (rising 10th grader at Burke High School), John-Paul Gadson (rising 10th grader at Charleston Charter School for Math and Science), Aaron Johnson (rising 11th grader at Charleston Charter School for Math and Science), Sage Braziel (Academic Magnet High School graduate), and Harper Reed (rising senior at Charleston County School of The Arts).

According to Allie Astor, Farm to School Program Coordinator with The Green Heart Project, the idea for a youth internship program was born many years ago and was recently finalized as a program modeled and adapted around other successful programs conducted across the country, including flagship program The Food Project out of Boston, MA.

“This program is more than an internship, it’s a comprehensive youth development program aimed at supporting diverse groups of young people as they begin their career paths,” said Amanda Howell, Program Director.

“The paid aspect of the program is a critical piece -- youth employment programs are shown to positively impact graduation and job placement rates, decrease the likelihood of incarceration, and contribute additional family income which helps to lift young people out of poverty.”

Recruitment began last fall and interviewing started in March. But as the state was ordered to shut down due to COVID-19, The Green Heart Project administrators knew they would have to restructure the internship program. COVID-19 protocols were put into place to ensure the safety of the interns,

staff, and contributors. The outdoor garden made for a perfect classroom where social distancing was more than possible.

The interns spent their mornings in Green Heart gardens and building the new half-acre Urban Farm at Enston Home and in the afternoons tuned in for lessons over Zoom. The program was more than just an internship. It was an opportunity to teach.

The Green Heart Project's Youth Internship Program empowers young people to be active leaders who are connected to the land and their community by cultivating: workplace and leadership, financial literacy and business skills; health and wellness, cooking and nutrition knowledge; environmental literacy, food systems, and sustainable agriculture proficiency through farm-based experiential learning.

"Additionally, the paid opportunity acknowledges that we appreciate and see the value in the work that our interns are doing," said Astor. "We recognize that young adults need to make and save money and as they develop skills in financial literacy through this internship, what better way to practice those skills than managing their own income."

In addition, interns helped manage a weekly "pay what you can" farm stand, harvested Green Heart produce, and prepared the community-supported agriculture (CSA) bundles for community pick up and delivery to the William Enston Home residents, many of whom are senior citizens.

"The students were also actively participating in building our new urban farm-site that is currently under construction," said Astor. "It is located within the William Enston Home, an affordable workforce housing community located at 900 King Street and will feature 65 raised garden beds. The project has been in the works for nearly five years and is expected to be completed by the end of Summer. The half-acre urban farm will serve as a hub for fresh food access and community building and will also be utilized for educational field trips and workshops for students and the community."

The internship also featured contributors who support the program such as restaurant owners, business entrepreneurs, chefs, and dietitians. They were invited to conduct demonstrations and offer lectures.

Kerrie Hollifield, the registered dietitian with CCSD's Office of Nutrition Services explained that the district's partnership with The Green Heart Project continues to gain traction, especially with opportunities that directly impact students.

Nutrition education is an important part of the curriculum taught in CCSD. According to Hollifield, this internship was a great way to continue those efforts. Hollifield was a presenter in the program, showing the interns how to read food labels, cook meals, teach unit costs, and grocery shop.

"The interns were bright and eager to learn," said Hollifield. "This partnership is extremely important to CCSD and Nutrition Services as we continue to expand our

nutrition education programs. This type of internship is not just for the students. We are passing along knowledge and recipes that students can bring back home to their families. In this way, we are expanding the knowledge of our students and their families.”

Astor added that health, wellness, nutrition, growing food, and getting hands dirty has a lasting impression on the interns. She said that many have expressed an interest in seeking future employment or volunteering in related fields. However, they didn’t all necessarily apply because they were seeking a career in the industry of farming or horticulture.

Applicants came from a wide array of interests and backgrounds, according to Astor. Some had interests in sustainable farming and others were just looking to spark new interests and get more involved in their community, Astor explained. The eight interns were selected from 42 competitive applications. “It was a competitive applicant pool,” said Astor. “I am thrilled with the students we selected. Their diversity of backgrounds, skills, and knowledge made it so successful.”

At the end of the eight-week internship, students left with a better understanding of how to manage money, the confidence to learn recipes, harvest, prepare, and cook nutritional meals, and the passion and drive to serve their community and work for social change.

“Looking ahead, this is sure to be a very unique semester for all our PreK-12 students and families,” said Howell. “We hope to take the many lessons learned from this summer to implement safe, outdoor Farm to School programs with the Charleston community this Fall, during a time when access to healthy food, hands-on education, and interpersonal connection is needed more than ever.”

Hands-on workshops for students, families, and community members are set to begin at the Urban Farm at Enston Home in mid-September. Visit www.greenheartsc.com for more information or email info@greenheartsc to join the mailing list.

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About the Charleston County School District

Charleston County School District (CCSD) is a nationally-accredited school district that is committed to providing equitable and quality educational opportunities for all of its students. CCSD is the second-largest school system in South Carolina and represents a unique blend of urban, suburban, and rural schools spanning 1,300 square miles along the coast. CCSD serves more than 50,000 students in 87 schools and specialized programs.

CCSD offers a diverse, expanding portfolio of options and specialized programs, delivered through neighborhood, magnet, IB (international baccalaureate), Montessori, and charter schools. Options include programs in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); music and other creative and performing arts; career and technical preparation programs; and military.