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The Garden Guru

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Photo by Jonathan Eckstein

Dorothy Mullen, well-known in the Princeton community for masterminding the Riverside Elementary School organic garden, has been a food activist for much of her adult life.

Dorothy moved to Princeton in 1977, after she graduated college. Her first job was at the

Columbus Boychoir School (which became the American Boychoir School), starting as Headmaster's Assistant and then becoming Admissions Director. She has since earned a master's degree in counseling at the College of New Jersey, where she initiated her research into the connection between food and mood from counseling recovering alcoholics and addicts. She has lived in Princeton ever since (except for a brief sojourn in Milwaukee) and has become a galvanizing force for food activism in the Princeton community.

She has three children who went through the Riverside Elementary School. After 9/11, with her youngest child in third grade, she decided to start an organic garden at the school - not only because of the myriad health benefits, but also because she wanted to carry out a peaceful community service project. Princeton Borough Councilman Roger Martindell had suggested that Dorothy reproduce her organic garden on public property. However, when her request to use park space was taking too much time to resolve at Princeton Borough Hall, she approached Bill Cirullo with her idea. Cirullo, who is the principal of the Riverside Elementary School in Princeton, was eager to host an organic school garden. "Outdoor science and environment

have always been two of my passions," says Cirullo. "Dorothy and I have been partners at Riverside for twenty years. She is a magnificent teacher of children. Our gardens have thrived for many years as a result of a strong vision and her dedication to serving children. She has embraced our community and sustained this important work with joy and great satisfaction."

When Dorothy started the Riverside school garden, the only garden that existed was an herb garden, which needed some work, on a sunny, south-facing slope. She started the Riverside garden on a 35' X 65' plot; it was an organic, instructional garden growing medicinal and culinary herbs, flowers, and some vegetables. All the elementary schools in Princeton had had some form of garden off and on in the years leading up to the Riverside garden, but it has been in only the last decade that school garden policy became district-wide.

Since its inception, Riverside teachers have used the garden to highlight aspects of school lessons as well as including garden education as part of their curriculum. During the fall and spring seasons, Dorothy runs a gardening club for third and fourth graders, working with them on practical gardening skills such as deadheading flowers, preparing soil, planting and harvesting vegetables and herbs. Family volunteers water, harvest, and maintain the garden throughout the summer.

This year Riverside Elementary School has emphasized even more strongly the role of the gardening program in school education, with a greater focus on food and the environment, because Dorothy is now the Garden Artist in Residence at Riverside. The Healthy Children, Healthy Planet program requires that every child in the school from pre-kindergarten to fifth grade participate in six to twelve classes per year (and more classes for the younger children).

Healthy Children, Healthy Planet is the most comprehensive and progressive garden-based public school program in New Jersey, linking lessons to New Jersey State standards with a garden activity. Second-graders learn about the life cycle of butterflies, third-graders learn about colonial herb gardens, fourth-graders make a Native American Three Sisters garden, and fifth-graders create a garden to grow produce to donate to the Crisis Ministry. Children are learning math, science, language arts, and community service through the organic garden.

Dorothy also trains Master Gardeners and community volunteers who want

to learn gardening in the school setting.

Along with Fran McManus, Karla Schultz and Diane Landis, Dorothy is a co-founder of the [Princeton School Gardens Cooperative](#), initiated nearly a decade after the inception of the Riverside school garden. The mission of the cooperative is to support more sustainable gardens at all schools in the district, including the middle school and high school. Princeton School Gardens Cooperative was recently awarded a \$30,000 grant from the [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#) for the [Garden State on Your Plate](#) program, which brings local chefs into Princeton public schools to expand the palates of children for farm-fresh produce. Dorothy is no longer on the board of Princeton School Gardens Cooperative but is still involved on a consulting basis, running programs and workshops such as garden classroom instruction at Littlebrook School.

Dorothy's other activities include conducting tours of the Riverside garden, running [food theme events](#) at the [Princeton Public Library](#), and being on the planning committee for the [Princeton Environmental Film Festival](#). She is often invited to speak on the relationship between health problems and processed food.

About three years ago she started [The Suppers Program](#), a nonprofit organization initiated to help individuals whose health, mental health, and recovery challenges require diet and lifestyle changes. Candidates for [The Suppers Program](#) include people with diabetes who need to reduce their carbohydrate intake, people suffering from food addiction, recovering alcoholics and anyone who wants to learn how to cook a wholesome and healthful meal. Dorothy also periodically runs [Suppers for Teens](#) classes to teach teenagers about nutrition and how to cook.

Dorothy's goal for the school gardens is to make them more sustainable. Riverside school has the most comprehensive and progressive school gardening program in New Jersey and the largest public school garden, but she feels that the garden is not sustainable in its current setup. She wants to continue offering teacher training and inspirational workshops to grow the movement across New Jersey and figure out how to properly sustain the school gardens. Unfortunately, Dorothy feels, they are all reinventing the wheel because the school gardens are driven by the community, not the school district.

Regarding [The Suppers Program](#), Dorothy wants to continue contributing to the larger movement that has linked major health and mental health

scourges to our processed food supply and environmental toxins. Her biggest challenge is finding people who can facilitate Suppers meetings. Dorothy says we have lost a generation of people who take pride and feel a great sense of purpose in feeding their families well. "Therefore," she says, "We have lost the means of transmitting the complex skills involved in cooking and maintaining a proper diet to subsequent generations." Her vision for [The Suppers Program](#) is to restore food preparation and family tables to their appropriate and crucial status in the home.

(Editor's Note: with this article, AllPrinceton begins our "Know Your Neighbor" series. We encourage submissions from Princeton residents who would like to highlight the community contributions of someone they know. [E-mail us](#) to suggest the next "Know Your Neighbor" profile.)

About the Author »



Bonnie Schultz

Bonnie Schultz has worked as a technology and marketing writer in the Boston area. She moved here in 1997 and is the mother of two boys. Since 2007, Bonnie has been blogging about food and community happenings in the Princeton area, through her blog "[The Blog That Ate New Jersey](#)".

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Submitted by Ronlavine on June 16, 2011 - 2:14pm

Dorothy's programs seem to address the core issues at the heart of so many of today's problems. They're an inspiration.

Ron Lavine, D.C. www.yourbodyofknowledge.com

Submitted by maggros on June 7, 2011 - 7:55am

I'm so happy to see this in depth article about Dorothy's work! She's such an

inspiration and is been one of those rare individuals who has made, and continues to make, a great positive difference in our lives by educating us about THE most fundamental aspect of living: taking care of ourselves continually and sustainably. I didn't know about Bonnie and her blog before seeing this article - thank you to Bonnie, Dorothy and AllPrinceton.com!!

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