



Submitted

A simple and sustainable concept: LIVE, WORK, EAT, GROW

By Holly Marrow

We can all agree that food is essential to life. Live, Work, Eat, Grow (LWEG) in Blacksburg is one organization fostering food security and sustainability, in addition to supporting local small businesses.

LWEG was founded in 2012 and serves as the umbrella organization for Millstone Kitchen and three community gardens located in Blacksburg. LWEG began as part of the revitalization of the former Price's Fork Elementary School building, which in addition to Millstone Kitchen, houses Moon Hollow Brewing and El Ranchero Mexican Restaurant.

Laina Schneider, with a background in food systems and a master's degree in international agricultural development, has been the Millstone Kitchen manager since April 2020, and is now executive director for LWEG, a 501c3 non-profit organization. Millstone Kitchen members pay an annual fee of \$150 which includes a keycard to the kitchen, cleaning supplies, and an online reservation platform. There is an additional \$22 per hour fee for use

of the stove and ovens. With access to a state-of-the-art professional kitchen, members can tap into a myriad of resources about food safety, health department regulations, starting a business, food sourcing and tip-sharing with other members. Schneider reminds members that she is not a "business expert," but she is happy to provide a consultation if people want to "flesh out an idea," and stresses "If I can't help them, I can refer them to someone who can."

LWEG provides education programs for the community, most of which are held at one of the Community Gardens so that the kitchen is not tied up when members need access. However, Millstone hosted "From Scratch," a workshop for start-up culinary businesses in early 2020, and Schneider is hoping to reinvigorate this

workshop with the current down-trend in COVID-19 cases. Programs held at the Community Gardens include maple syrup tapping and a children's summer camp called Seed to Supper Gardening Camp. Registration is through Blacksburg Parks and Recreation.

Millstone Kitchen is the only shared-use kitchen in the New River Valley, and members tend to learn about the facility through networking and word of mouth. "I get inquiries every single week," says Schneider. "I haven't had to do much marketing." Initial funding for Millstone Kitchen was through a Rural Business Development Grant, and The Montgomery County Cares Act provided a grant during the pandemic. Through the Cares Act grant, Millstone has generated 500 weekly meals to seniors and shut-ins. Meals are prepared by caterers and are distributed through 7 different agencies. That grant ends in July of this year, but Schneider is hopeful this program can continue, "if even on a smaller scale."

Rachel Doyle, owner of HazelBea Catering, was the first member and "anchor tenant" of Millstone Kitchen. "It was a very symbiotic relationship," says Doyle. "They needed to learn what their clients were going to need, and (Millstone) had more than we could ever ask for" in terms of kitchen equipment. Doyle goes on to stress how helpful Millstone is to new start-ups. "Whether you are a caterer, baker, make kombucha, or just want to find out if this business is right for you,



Laina Schneider, Executive Director of Live, Work, Eat, Grow

"Millstone is a very neat place to be."

Jackie Gardner, owner of Just Graze & Co, a Blacksburg business that creates made-to-order charcuterie trays, is one of Millstone

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Shane Comber, Hazel Bea Catering Chef, and Ashton Carter, a freelance chef



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Kitchen's newer members. "I was looking for a community kitchen and I just Googled it," says Gardner, "I was thrilled to find a kitchen in Blacksburg" she adds, initially thinking she would have to travel farther away. Gardner joined Millstone in February of this year and hasn't yet had time to tap into networking and making connections with other businesses. She considers this a huge benefit and looks forward to engaging with other culinary artists. "We're all in the same boat, and in a small town like Blacksburg ... this is exciting!"

The three community gardens managed by LWEГ are all within the town of Blacksburg and feature a total of 118 plots, says Steve Kruger, Garden Coordinator for LWEГ since August 2021. The garden plots are available to growers who, for a variety of reasons, do not have access to a growing space at home. Members pay an annual fee of \$20 to \$60, depending on plot size. There is currently a waiting list of roughly 40 hopeful gardeners and the organization plans to add additional

gardens over the next few years. Tools are available for loan, and gardeners are expected to follow certain guidelines - growing organically for one. Organically composted leaf mulch is provided, and no pesticides are allowed. Kruger is always available to help new gardeners get started, and often refers to existing resources such as the county extension service or the NRV Master Gardeners' Association.

Two community gardens - Wong Garden and Garrison Garden are part of existing Town of Blacksburg parks. The third space - Hale Garden, was donated to the Town by long-time resident Arlene Lambert with a stipulation to preserve it as a green space. In addition to garden plots, Hale Garden features a pollinator garden, orchard, and a food forest featuring apple and other fruit-bearing trees, berries, and hazelnuts.

Kruger feels the community reaps many benefits from LWEГ's Community Gardens. In addition to educational workshops and a summer camp, Gardeners seeking

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camaraderie often make lasting friendships. We actually have “little communities within the big community,” Kruger says. “We have multi-generational growers and a large community of international growers.” Every month at

Hale Gardens, there is a potluck gathering for all community garden members. “We empower people to grow their own food” says Kruger, and in the process, they find community, food security, and the many mental-health benefits of gardening. 

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