

[← Back](#)

Growing mind, body and soul in the Peace Garden

By Maggie Miles Correspondent June 18, 2021 Publication: Virginian-Pilot, The (Norfolk, VA) Page: 5E Word Count: 805

Peace Garden Project, a nonprofit based in Manteo, is on a mission to create a healthy community here on the Outer Banks.

Organization founder Michelle Lewis believes that the key to a healthy community is accessibility. She wants to bring education and resources to help people better understand their neighbors, build bridges and strengthen their sense of social justice.

But in order to get there, she believes we also need to take care of ourselves physically.

"There's a mind-body-spirit connection there," Lewis says.

Through the Peace Garden Project's many programs, the organization connects spirituality, environmental justice, food justice and cultural competence. One of their principal projects focuses on teaching these issues to high school and middle school interns. In doing this, they simultaneously show the students how to grow food and maintain gardens in backyards throughout Manteo, where families and individuals have volunteered their land to the program.

Peace Garden Project's slogan is, "Growing food and healthy community."

By "healthy community," Lewis means recognizing people's different religious and spiritual beliefs and understanding that across these differences, we all share the same basic needs.

They started, naturally, with our most basic human need: food. Last year they gave away more than 150,000 lbs. of food to anyone in Dare County, no questions asked. No paperwork, no proof of income, just drive up and get your box of food. Like I said, Lewis believes in accessibility.

The next basic need the project addressed was physical activity. What better way to achieve that mind-body-spirit connection than through yoga? And where better to do it than in their Manteo gardens. Starting this past May, they began offering free yoga sessions on Beechland Farm the first Sunday of every month and free meditation on the third Sunday of every month. Lewis believes yoga is a necessary resource that needs to be more accessible to everyone.

Yoga classes are taught by Maria Williamson, who donates her time to teach the classes so that they can keep them free of charge. She believes in what the Peace Garden Project is doing in the community in teaching people how to grow their own food.

How does yoga fit into that?

"Yoga is the garden," she says. It's a metaphor. "There's the seed that's within you, and you need to nurture it, water it, give it sun and care for it, and then not only is there the growing in the actual literal physical garden, but also the growing out into the community, so that outreach is

really beautiful."

Lewis herself teaches the meditation class. In her former life, Michelle was a trained reverend from Yale Divinity School. In fact, Lewis was the first person of color to graduate from Yale University with Joint Master's degrees from Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies and Yale Divinity School (Master of Environmental Science/Master of Divinity).

She also holds a certificate in liturgy from Yale Institute of Sacred Music and the Arts and holds a Doctorate from Candler School of Theology at Emory University. Her meditation certification came from a hospital she served as a chaplain.

Did we mention she holds a Certificate in Leadership, Organizing, and Action from the Harvard Kennedy School for Executive Leadership? It's like she's been made to start an organization like the Peace Garden Project.

There have only been a couple of classes so far at the organization's gardens at Beechland Farm in Manteo, but so far it has been met with much excitement. Participants especially love the location.

"I love communing in nature," Laura Allendorf says, 61, of Manteo. "I've been taking classes with Maria in other locations, and I wanted to continue, especially on a Sunday, a beautiful day. I absolutely loved it. It's so nice being outside."

Lewis has lots of ideas for projects and expansions. In the meantime, to help with that, the organization is always open to volunteers lending a hand out in their gardens or accepting a

donation. Even better, you can volunteer your empty backyard or a plot of land for them to turn into a Peace Garden! Their Facebook page posts updates of when free food boxes are available and information about yoga, meditation and other projects planned for the future.

"It's great to be back here and doing this work in my community," Lewis says. "I know that if I can contribute in a meaningful way and give young people the opportunity to have unique experiences that help to prepare them for college and their future life, maybe they'll go to school and come back one day. They'll be able to make the community and the world a better place. Because that's my thing. It's possible to change the world but we can change our communities too. We can change our households. We can change our neighborhoods."

With people like Lewis in the world, yes we can.

Yoga instructor Maria Williamson leads yoga classes the first Sunday of every month at Beechland Farms. Maggie Miles

Virginian-Pilot, The (Norfolk, VA)

Date: June 18, 2021

Page: 5E

Copyright (c) 2021 The Virginian-Pilot