

# Register-Star

## Kids meet food at Sylvia Center

By SUSAN SIMON

There are stories that are painted of idyllic summer days on a farm framed with corn fields; kids swinging on a tire suspended from a big, old oak tree while chickens and ducks peck and cluck nearby; of pitchers of lemonade, and peach pies resting on a windowsill; of colanders filled with peas waiting to be shelled and strawberries to be hulled; and catching fireflies in a Mason jar when the sky turns navy blue.

The reality is that for the majority of people sweltering summer days are more likely spent, if fortunate, sitting on a stoop with the occasional opened fire hydrant to cool down steaming kids, and maybe a cup of shaved ice purchased from a street vendor's cart, flavored with colors (yes, colors not real food) not found in nature. The concrete heats the atmosphere to the boiling point creating inescapable heat.

Enter Liz Neumark, owner of the legendary New York City catering company, Great Performances. Ten years ago Neumark purchased 60 acres of unfarmed land in Kinderhook. Her idea was to make an organic farm, named Katchkie Farm for her son's nickname, and create a center to inspire children to eat well and to learn about the food that they eat.

The center, named for Neumark's late daughter, Sylvia — [www.sylviacenter.org](http://www.sylviacenter.org) — who wanted to grow up to be a "helpful human" — was in Neumark's words, "Learning how

to 'live on' after losing Sylvia was a mystery. Creating a living legacy so that we could say her name every day and keep her spirit alive and to honor her by doing the good she dreamed of..."

Some of those kids who would otherwise be confined to the miasma of summer in the city now have the opportunity to come to Kinderhook and go through the chicken coop searching for eggs, cradle a docile chicken, walk through the two-acre portion of the farm created for, and by them — the rest of the farm produces ingredients for the Great Performances kitchen, to sell at green markets, and for CSAs — stop by the cook barn and pick up a "shopping list" from one of the chef volunteers and then return to their garden to gather them to make lunch.



Kids with Julie Cerney in the vegetable garden.

Hundreds and hundreds of children, not just from the city, have the opportunity to participate in one day, several days, or a ten-week program at the center, May through October. They come from the nearby Columbia County schools, from Hudson's Perfect Ten after-school program, and from Questar Hudson's vocational students.

The day that I visited Katchkie Farm, the Sylvia Center's educational director, the indefatigable Julie Cerney, was taking some kids from a nearby school on a tour. When they



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arrived at the open-sided cook barn they were immediately put to work hulling strawberries for their dessert — ice cream.

Volunteer chef Nina Simmons and her colleague, Rebecca had already made the ice cream's custard base. Since the cook barn doesn't have electricity — they used an old fashioned crank ice cream maker. The container in the center of the wooden tub was filled with the custard and chopped strawberries and the sides were packed with ice and rock salt. Rebecca toned her arms by cranking the wooden bucket until the ice cream was firm. The kids returned to their garden with a shopping list prepared by Simmons, and picked garlic chives, broccoli, sweet purple peppers, basil and other assorted herbs — and, at the last minute, a few just-ripened raspberries to throw into the now-mixed berry ice cream. They also planted some seeds to ensure future crops.

When they returned to their chopping boards they scooped out zucchini to make boats for stuffing. They chopped herbs to add to the stuffing, and peppers and broccoli to toss into already cooked navy beans to make a salad. I was the fortunate recipient of their labor. They, and their teachers, whipped together, in record time, a lunch worthy of the best “farm to table” restaurant. Their farm was a hundred yards from their table.

The big farm-to-table benefit dinner — Celebrate Community — was held in Katchkie Farm's fields a few days after my initial visit. The dinner was hosted by Great Performances with help, all volunteer, from Sylvia Center students, and professionals. More than 300 guests parked a pretty good distance from the main dining tent and the cook barn, which had become the hors d'oeuvre and bar area.

The walk to the activities was purely bucolic — a refreshment station was set-up up at the half-way point of the walk with cucumber, watermelon and lemon water dispensers — with

the setting sun to the right, Cerney led guests on tours of the kids' vegetable garden, Neumark greeted each arriving guest, tables set, all named for a vegetable (I was happy to be assigned to artichoke) peeked out of the main dining tent, while party-goers dressed in summer casual chic sipped cool cocktails and savored hors d'oeuvre that included little tarts with beets and burrata cheese, smoked trout and radishes, beef tartar, chermoula and quail eggs and fried oysters, just to name a few, and get your appetite whetted for next year's benefit dinner. This was the translation of that Hollywood story of summertime on the farm.

We sat down to our first course in place — a sweet corn and tomato verrine — because it was served in a glass jar — with pickled chile peppers, pesto and toasted quinoa — quite possibly the best thing that I've eaten this summer. The main course was a buffet with Montauk tilefish, roasted Hudson Valley duck breast, Thai beef salad and on and on — lots of salads. The dessert buffet included four different pies; strawberry-rhubarb, blueberry lavender crumble, peach blackberry and chocolate pudding meringue.

Among the happy and sated guests was New York State Assemblymember Didi Barrett. I asked what the Sylvia Center meant to her. “They are educating our next generation about healthy eating and where the food comes from and why those things matter,” she said. “They do it with grace, and with substance, reaching out to communities which are often underserved.”

As the evening wound down, and guests moved from table to table to greet their friends, I became aware of little Mason jars on the tables that lit up as if they held captured fireflies — not quite — it was instead 2014's version — LED lights. The point was made. The lights were a tiny beacon. A reminder of the little girl in whose memory this entire setting and evening commemorated.



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