

GARDENING GROWS INTO DREAM JOB

For Laurel Daily-Hill, the need for healing turned into a passion for gardening and a way to help others

Just like the plants she tends, Laurel Daily-Hill is growing and blossoming.

However, it hasn't been an easy row to hoe.

"I had a housecleaning service for 20 years. It helped put four kids through school," Daily-Hill says with pride. Being a business owner is "like having a screaming baby that never shuts up," she says with a chuckle. There were personnel problems and just plain hard work. Case in point: "The biggest account I had, for eight and a half years, was an assisted living facility. There were 76 toilets I had to clean, every three days." In 1999, Daily-Hill disbanded her business.

After a few years away, Daily-Hill needed to re-enter the workforce. However, her job skills needed an update. She learned about the Southwest Washington Displaced Homemaker program offered at Clark College and learned she qualified for it. The thought of participating both excited and terrified her. "It had been 40 years since I'd been to school," and the first go-round had been a bit of a struggle, she confides.

As an adult, Daily-Hill was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and dyslexia. Returning to a classroom was a daunting prospect. "When I was getting ready to go (to school), I'd have anxiety attacks. I was pretty sure I was going to have a heart attack," she shares.

But Daily-Hill persisted. The Displaced Homemaker program included a skills and abilities assess-

"I knew exactly what I wanted to do...I wanted to incorporate grief therapy and gardening."

- LAUREL DAILY-HILL

ment. Its results brought Daily-Hill to tears. "It said I should be a small business owner. I said, 'No! I don't want to do that!'" she recalls. "I knew exactly what I wanted to do. ... I wanted to incorporate grief therapy and gardening."

Daily-Hill knew from personal experience the therapeutic power of gardening. In fact, the groundwork for her new career started nearly two decades ago.

"Because of incidents in family, I couldn't stop crying. ... There was something really wrong. It was more than just grief," the woman recounts. Daily-Hill turned to her pastor for some guidance. "He said, 'I feel the Lord is going to turn over the soil of your heart,' and that He wanted to heal me of an old wound. Little did (the pastor) know, I had a shovel and 11 rose bushes in the car. I'd never planted anything. I was 40-years-old. So, I started digging these holes. ... When I started digging, I found serious trash. ... (The yard) had been like a dumping ground. I went down on my knees and said, 'Lord, if there's this much junk in my heart, help me clean it out.'"

Daily-Hill took to gardening with gusto. Eventually, there were over 300 roses in her yard and room for no more. When digging the hole for

the very last bush, Daily-Hill heard a clicking sound. Amazingly, she had unearthed a diamond ring. "There was so much healing there," she says of tending her fledgling garden. "I realized, 'I'm OK.'"

When Daily-Hill made her declaration about her dream job, the Displaced Homemaker instructor let her know about a 19-month horticulture therapy program at Legacy Good Samaritan Hospital, home of the award winning Healing Garden. "I signed up immediately," says Daily-Hill, who completed the training last September.

Now, the Master Gardener is drawing upon that knowledge in a cooperative work experience at the Veterans Administration Medical Center in Vancouver. "She just glows when she talks about her job over there," reports Maxine Mitchell, director of Career and Employment Services at Clark College.

"It's like this perfect fit. I love it!" says Daily Hill. "You have a client who has specific goals that need to be met in a form of rehabilitation.



Photo by Kristine Kisky

Laurel Daily-Hill looks out over a patch of ground that will someday be a hospice healing garden outside the Veterans Administration's Skilled Nursing Care facility off Fort Vancouver Way.

You match that gardening activity with that," she says of her work. Daily-Hill finds parallels between the bonds she forges with hospital patients and her work in the garden. Both require cultivation and care.

According to Legacy Health Systems, horticultural therapy helps restore a patient's self-confidence and sense of purpose, as they are placed in a caregiver role. Additionally, "It distracts (patients) from where they are and increases their level of comfort," says Daily-Hill.

And even when patients aren't physically participating, they are engaged by the horticulture-related activity. "They are watching me," Daily-Hill says of patients at the Vancouver VA center. "I raked 66 bags of leaves when I first started trying to clean up this area," she

recounts. "One man came out and said, 'You know, if you need me to, I could write your teacher a letter and tell him you're doing a good job,'" she shares, smiling.

A skilled networker, Daily-Hill solicited donations, put together a planting cart and invited VA patients to plant bulbs in pots. She is also working with a team to establish a hospice healing garden.

Earlier this month, Daily-Hill was offered her first professional gardening gig, as a greenhouse assistant for the head of Clark College's horticulture department, Dr. Herb Orange.

Upon reflection, Daily-Hill marvels at the ground she has covered. She encourages others to pursue their dream job, no matter the barriers. "I never, ever thought I could change that much. If I can do it, anybody can do it. I'm so grateful," she declares. "I'm in the totally perfect place at the perfect time."

More information:

Southwest Washington Displaced Homemaker Program at Clark College offers free services to those who qualify, including information and referrals and job readiness training. Call 360-992-2321.

Horticulture Therapy at Legacy: www.legacyhealth.org/body.cfm?id=694

Helping hands: Anyone interested in donating plants, pets or other landscaping supplies for the grounds of the Vancouver Veterans Administration campus should contact Ann Marie Murphy, 360-696-4061, ext. 33360.