

Khayelitsha's healing oasis for the elderly

In the heart of Khayelitsha in the Western Cape, the food garden at the Neighbourhood Old Age Homes (NOAH) has become a sanctuary for elderly community members. This little green oasis has become a source of nutritious produce, but more importantly, of friendship and fellowship among the people who tend to it.

Nqwenise Gcaza (78) says NOAH has become a refuge following immense heartache and stress over the last few years. He lost his wife in 2015, leaving him to care for their six children. Not long after, Gcaza tragically lost his son, and then earlier this year, he was hospitalised due to low blood pressure. After returning to NOAH and immersing himself in the garden, Gcaza says his health has improved significantly.

"Gardening brings so many benefits," explains Anne Dobson, Head of Sustainability at NOAH. "It's not only about growing fresh produce; it's about establishing and growing connections. For many older adults, retirement can be isolating, and this garden offers an inclusive space to engage and enjoy the company of fellow gardeners, reconnect with nature, and share knowledge and skills."

NOAH impacts not only the elderly directly involved with the garden, continues Dobson, but also their families and broader community.

"I use the garden for physical exercise and healing by getting my hands into the soil," says Singiswa Xiniwe. "I enjoy being able to transfer my skills, teaching my grandchildren how to grow and look after plants the way I was taught as a young child."

Nomboniso Dyontya (69) began working in the garden in 2022 after being introduced to NOAH through her friend while waiting in a SASSA queue at Shoprite. Dyontya knows the value of food gardens, having provided her family of six with nutritious produce from her own home garden for many years. Now, she and her four grandchildren tend to their garden together and rarely go to bed hungry, using spinach to make one of their favourite meals, umfino.

Shoprite has been supporting the NOAH community food garden since July 2019 as part of its Act For Change programme. The supermarket supplied the garden with much-needed infrastructure such as fencing and shade netting. Garden members also received hands-on permaculture training over a period of 18 months, and Shoprite regularly supplies gardening resources such as seedlings, seeds, and compost.

"Our garden is a place for healing, learning, and community," says Asiphe Mntuyedwa, NOAH's Khayelitsha Centre Co-ordinator. "Here, our elders find purpose, share their wisdom, and heal through sharing and friendship."

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