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THE BALTIMORE BANNER

How middle school farmers are helping feed their neighbors

Talia Richman

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“We believe everyone has a right to farm-fresh produce,” said the manager of the Montgomery County farm

Lorelei Machado hates anything remotely spicy.

The Montgomery County eighth grader will make an exception, though, for the arugula she planted herself. She loves it — even though her arugula packs that peppery punch you can never seem to get from the leaves sitting in a big-box grocery store.

Lorelei, 13, has watched her arugula grow, centimeter by centimeter, for much of the time she’s attended A. Mario Loiederman Middle School. She can see the little specks of green from her math classroom’s window.

Students at Loiederman — a school where most families qualify for free or reduced-price meals — broke ground on a one-acre campus farm in April 2024. A partnership with the Charles Koiner Conservancy for Urban Farming supported its planning and funding.

The kids watched and waited as a once-empty field beside their tennis courts gradually transformed: raised garden beds for tomatoes. A fence to keep out deer. A shed for the tools.

Now the farm is in bloom, yielding enough fresh produce to sustain a monthly farmers market. Lorelei is one of the

“There’s something different about it when you see it grow yourself,” she said. “When you finally eat it, you feel some sort of pride in your heart.”



The student operated garden at Loiderman Middle School. (Kaitlin Newman/The Banner)

‘It’s about empowerment’

The farm at Loiederman is a piece of Montgomery County Public Schools’ push for environmental sustainability. District leaders want students learning how to protect the planet they’re growing up on.

Officials chose the campus because it’s in a high-needs community, where families tend to have limited food access. Twenty schools operate within a 2-mile radius, positioning the farm as a hub for roughly 17,000

leaders said, it can be a resource for families across the Wheaton-Glenmont area.

About two-thirds of Loiederman students qualify for free or reduced-price meals, a proxy of community poverty.

Carol Fernandez, the community school liaison, said she hopes the farm inspires families to create gardens of their own. A little balcony, she said, has enough room for one.

“It’s about empowerment,” she said. “It’s not necessarily, ‘Let me hold your hand and give you food.’ It’s about teaching them: How can I use the resources within my community to do this for myself and for my family.”



The farmer's market adjacent to the garden at the school sells a plethora of produce.
(Kaitlin Newman/The Banner)

Reading, writing, weeding

The farm is part of a broader plan to modernize Loiederman's campus, which was the site of a walkout last year to protest [unhealthy building conditions](#).

During hard times, people gravitate toward gardens, said Kate Medina, the conservancy's director. Think of "victory gardens" during World War II, she said, or the massive spike in home gardening amid the pandemic.

Montgomery County is facing some hard times, too.

Some families are girding for [a possible recession](#), while others are fearful about the [Trump administration's immigration crackdown](#). Two of the farm's volunteer harvesters were laid off from government jobs. And a federal grant program that the conservancy applied for — focused on climate and environmental justice — was caught in political crosshairs.

The middle school farm, meanwhile, can be a refuge.



Kate Medina, Executive Director at the Charles Koiner Conservancy for Urban Farming, helps at the garden. (Kaitlin Newman/The Banner)



The farm at Loiederman is a piece of Montgomery County Public Schools' push for environmental sustainability. (Kaitlin Newman/The Banner)



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Teachers are encouraged to bring their students out for afternoon reading sessions among the sunset-colored chard and towering okra. Children can practice morning yoga near the tomatillos and mizuna.

There are academic opportunities, too, to talk about photosynthesis and invasive species (Lorelei smushed at least [one spotted lanternfly](#) during The Banner's farm visit).

For Lorelei, the lessons have been numerous. She knows to be patient while harvesting, leaving enough on each plant that they'll continue to sprout. She understands how much effort it takes to create the meals she eats — so much that she now scolds her little brother when he tries to throw away perfectly good food.

Along with her classmates, she's mastered produce puns and garden jokes: *Why did the tomato blush? Because it saw the salad dressing.*

"Get it? Get it?" Lorelei asked a group of farm staff on a recent afternoon.



Lorelei Machado laughs after telling a garden joke. (Kaitlin Newman/The Banner)

She heads to the farm every Monday and Wednesday after the final bell, immediately jumping from chorus class to watering and harvesting. Then, every third Wednesday of the month, it's market time, with orange tents popping up beside the middle school's tennis courts.

Pie and gumbo

Volunteers set up tents and tables, piled with vegetables picked earlier that day. There are cartons of jalapeños for \$2, eggplants for \$3 a pound and bags of Lorelei's spicy arugula for \$4.

Farm staff want the prices to stay affordable. The money earned at the market goes back into the farm's operating

budget, and much of the produce is donated to groups combating food insecurity.

“We believe everyone has a right to farm-fresh produce,” head farm manager Emily Sells said.



Gardening and farming tools lined up in an area of the garden. (Kaitlin Newman/The Banner)



CJ Kula of the Chesapeake Bay Trust, helps tend to produce in the garden.
(Kaitlin Newman/The Banner)



Picked produce on sale at the farmer's market adjacent to the school. (Kaitlin Newman/The Banner)

The most recent market day started slowly, as a mist of rain kept people indoors. The group wasn't too worried. "No farmer I know is ever going to complain about rain," Medina said.

By 4:30 p.m., the rain cleared and a white van with a group from a nearby senior living facility pulled up. Low-income residents there receive vouchers through the Housing Opportunities Commission to help them purchase the farm goods.

"We've got rush hour now," Lorelei said, beelining for the cash register to ring up produce for women from the van

Beulah Williams, 79, comes to the market every month she can. This trip, she selected okra, peppers and green beans. She'd make gumbo with her haul.



Lines form as community members shop at the farmers market. (Kaitlin Newman/The Banner)

Sells, the farm manager, stood back and watched: There was Lorelei on the cash register, advising customers on how to sauté sweet potato greens. Nearby, two little girls inspected apples that would later become pie. Women from the senior apartments poked around the raised garden beds.

“It was just grass,” Sells said. “Now we’re feeding the community.”

The final Loiederman market of the season will be Oct. 15. First-time customers can pick one item to take home

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