



**LEFT** Dennis Perry and Maricel Martindale test the quality of water used to grow young oaks at Growing Works in Camarillo. The saplings will be planted at the memorial for victims of the mass shooting at the Borderline Bar & Grill in Thousand Oaks. **ABOVE** Tom Hayduk and Jorge Lagunas, holding the plant to his nose, inspect oak saplings. **BELOW LEFT** Michael Moore rakes garden debris on an early November day at the nursery. **BELOW** Jorge Lagunas wheels flats of succulents across the grounds. **OPPOSITE PAGE** Growing Works employee Maricel Martindale enjoys the hands-on nature of plant nursery work.





# PLANTING HOPE

## *Nursery jobs aid healing from mental illness*

BY KIM LAMB GREGORY // PHOTOS BY KAREN QUINCY LOBERG

Maricel Martindale walks along wooden tables holding neat rows of potted plants, one hand brushing the tops of the leaves.

“These are all my babies,” she said.

Martindale, 38, recently earned employee status at Growing Works, a nonprofit wholesale nursery in Camarillo that offers 316 varieties of drought-tolerant landscape plants.

Growing Works also harvests healing through a vocational training program for people with mental-health challenges who are receiving services from Ventura County Behavioral Health.

“The premise behind Growing Works is to give those who have experienced mental illness the opportunity to have access to employment,” said Executive Director Jason Meek of Turning Point Foundation, which operates the nursery. “So people can gain employment skills in an environment that is safe and conducive to recovery.”

*Continued*



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### Planting hope

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Ventura County District 2 Supervisor Linda Parks seeded the project, which began in July 2018 and has since served 78 individuals.

“It is performing even better than we had thought,” Parks said. “We have a lot of participants who are now getting paychecks.”

*“... A lot of the nonprofits provide for basic needs, but what this organization offers is an opportunity for people to feel valued. Something beyond survival. It’s essential for all of us to feel useful.”*

David Martinez  
Marz Farms

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Plants are sold to landscape companies, retailers and nonprofit gardens such as the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden, Ventura Botanical Gardens and the Theodore Payne Foundation in Sun Valley.

### Seven years in the making

A similar program in San Luis Obispo County impressed Parks, and she wanted to use it as a model for Ventura County. After seven years of waiting for the stars to align, she found the perfect spot — county-owned land on Lewis Road in Camarillo, donated by the state when Camarillo State Hospital closed.

Parks called Meek, who was enthusiastic. “It couldn’t have worked better in terms of having both the human capital to do the project and the actual land,” Meek said.

Somis rancher David Martinez of Marz Farms owns property behind the almost nine acres earmarked for Growing Works, so Parks gave a courtesy call to Martinez to let him know about the

development that would be taking place next to his land. Martinez assured her it would not affect his farming operations as he no longer used the land and, in fact, would donate \$40,000 for fencing.

“I thought the vision behind it was great,” Martinez said. “I think a lot of the nonprofits provide for basic needs, but what this organization offers is an opportunity for people to feel valued. Something beyond survival. It’s essential for all of us to feel useful.”

The Growing Works journey begins with “supported employment” for individuals who perform 24 months of volunteer gardening along with group and individual therapy, according to Growing Works Project Manager Mark Schumacher.

“As you earn hours as a volunteer, you move forward in the program and eventually can become an employee,” he said.

Martindale is thrilled to have graduated to employee status.

“I was isolated for a long time. I’d say about 10 years. I was in a rough relationship,” said Martindale, who manages her anxiety and depression. “Being in the program taught me how to work with people again — how to socialize.”

Ron Quasebarth, 60, joined the program three months ago after doing prison time in 2003, experiencing homelessness, mental illness and substance abuse.

“I was pretty strung out,” Quasebarth said. “I rode a bicycle all the way here from San Francisco. I had no food, no money. ... I almost died.”

He was admitted to the county’s Crisis Residential Treatment program and then went to Turning Point.

The camaraderie, the understanding when he has what he calls “episodes” and working with plants placed him on the path to wellness.

#### ‘Positive endorphins’

“You’re getting Vitamin D, you’re outside, you’re working in the sun, you’re exerting yourself and getting positive endorphins,” Meek said. “From a clinical perspective, you’re focusing on a task that is not overly complex. You’re in the moment, concentrating on something that is going to grow and bring oxygen and smell beautiful.”

“Plants are inherently a hopeful thing,” said Nursery Manager Jenn Rodriguez. “A seed is just a little bit of dust, and from that you get a plant that smells good and blooms.”

Parks and Meek have plans for Growing Works. Both want to include more military veterans who may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Meek also would like to involve members of the Mixteco community.

Rodriguez has a wish list of about 400 plants, and as the nursery expands, it will need equipment and tools, if farmers can spare them.

Parks said she also hopes the agricultural community will consider hiring people trained through Growing Works, so they can truly grow into all they were meant to be.

“We have a lot of miracles here,” Schumacher said.

**Kim Lamb Gregory**, a communication specialist at Cal State Channel Islands, is a veteran print and broadcast journalist.

To donate to Growing Works, email Suki Sir at [ssir@turningpoint.org](mailto:ssir@turningpoint.org).

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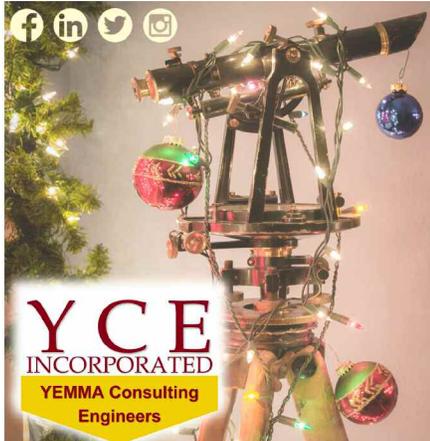
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