

Ex-homeless raise crops for Miami restaurant

By Christina Veiga

It's 8 a.m. and the sun is just beginning its relentless beating. The ground is damp from an early morning shower, bringing out the smell of dirt and mulch at the Verde Gardens farm in Homestead.

Abutting the Homestead Air Reserve Base, the 22-acre organic farm is run in part by people transitioning out of homelessness. Some of the yield goes to a market run by the residents, and some makes the short trip to the downtown Miami Restaurant, Tuyo.

The restaurant's head chef, Norman Van Aken, toured the farm Tuesday. The idea to get fresh produce from Verde happened over dinner, Van Aken said, when Verde Gardens administrators came to dine. The restaurant already features fresh produce grown in its own garden. It just made sense to extend the practice by using Verde Gardens crops, Van Aken said. The goal is for people to create a connection to where their food comes from.

"When you lose that connected aspect to the land, to animals, I think it really destroys our appreciation for food," Van Aken said.

Tuyo sits atop the Miami Culinary Institute at Miami Dade College, but seemingly worlds away from the farmers who provide fine-diners their fresh greens.

Back at the farm, Daniel Lopez is happy to be bent at the waist, pulling weeds to make way for collard greens to be planted. "It's a great experience," he said.

Lopez has tattoos on each of his hands that boast "MIA" and the city's area code. He has studs in each ear and is wearing all black and a baseball cap. Until recently, Lopez was homeless. He, his girlfriend and their four kids moved into Verde Gardens, an apartment complex for people transitioning out of homelessness, about nine months ago. He wasn't there long before his girlfriend told him about the farm.

Growing up in Miami, Lopez's family grew tomatoes, bell peppers and other produce at home. So he applied to become an apprentice at the Verde Gardens farm, learning about sustainable growing in the classroom and then getting his hands dirty on the farm. Eventually, he may be able to work his



Norman Van Aken, a well-known chef, left, Mario Yanez, director of Earth Learning, Janet Van Aken, and Elizabeth Regalado, assistant director of the Miami-Dade County Homeless Trust, right, tour the Verde Gardens farm, Tuesday, July 10, 2012, in Homestead. The farm provides food for both the Homestead Harvest Market and Café and Van Aken's restaurant Tuyo.

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own plot of land at the farm.

“When the mosquitoes are not attacking you, it’s relaxing. You just get away from normal, everyday life,” Lopez said.

Verde Gardens is the first community to incorporate transitional housing, a farm and a farmer’s market all in the same compound, said Elizabeth Regalado, assistant director of the Miami-Dade County Homeless Trust. The trust funded the \$20 million project.

Tina Fadil, director of clinical services for Carrfour Supportive Housing, the agency that runs the program, said the farm helps teach residents useful skills to help end the cycle of homelessness. “Everyone wants to be a part of something. It’s a great experience to be a part of,” Lopez said.

Since living at Verde Gardens, Lopez completed his GED. He said he’s applying to Miami Dade College to studying something to do with computers — another of his passions. He looked to his future with his girlfriend as he continued pulling weeds.

“This is temporary,” Lopez said. “We have a 5- to 10-year plan. In 5 to 10 years, her career will be taking off. My career will be taking off. Hopefully I’ll have a house, and I’ll be weeding at my house.”