Garden produces praise from Obama
San Diego Union-Tribune - Friday, April 16, 2010
Author: By Keith Darcé

First lady Michelle Obama brought her campaign against childhood obesity to San Diego on Thursday, stopping at a City Heights neighborhood garden that she called a model for communities around the country.

"It is just a phenomenal initiative," she told a crowd of 300 guests after touring the 2.2-acre New Roots Community Farm on Chollas Parkway.

The 89 plots offer relief from three of the problems driving high rates of obesity and the resulting medical ailments, she said.

The homegrown food subsidizes tight family budgets. The garden injects fresh fruit and vegetables into diets heavy in processed foods, and better eating habits can help alleviate diabetes, high blood pressure and other chronic health conditions.

Somalian refugee Khadiga Musame, 47, gave Obama a tour of her 20-foot-by-20-foot space, where neat rows of kale and Swiss chard have replaced weeds.

Musame wore the head wrap and patterned gown of her native land, which featured large maps of Africa and a center medallion with the phrase "Hongera Barack Obama" (Swahili for "Congratulations Barack Obama") spread above a picture of the president's face.

"My heart was so happy, Musame said through a friend who speaks better English. "I couldn't stop hugging her."

Other immigrants from Africa, Southeast Asia and Latin America created the farm with help from two nonprofits — the International Rescue Committee and the California Endowment.

Increasing access to fresh fruits and vegetables is a major theme of Obama's "Let's Move!" project, which was launched in February.

Nutrition experts said fresh produce is particularly needed in poor neighborhoods, including City Heights, where residents often rely on fast-food restaurants and convenience stores because the areas lack full-scale grocery stores and farmers markets.

In San Diego County, an estimated 12 percent of children ages 12 to 17 are obese and 11 percent more are overweight, according to public-health researchers.
Obama’s visit was her first to the region since becoming first lady.

The trip included some emotional moments with farmer Tsitsi Mutseta, 43, who has late-stage breast cancer. After their meeting, Mutseta said she told Obama that her garden provides solace amid the stress of dealing with the disease. Mutseta also said the patch makes her feel connected to her family’s farm in Zimbabwe, where her mother and sister live.

"It means (Obama) cares about women with breast cancer, which is a big comfort for me," Mutseta said.

The growers’ efforts resonated with the first lady, who planted her own vegetable patch on the South Lawn of the White House in spring 2009.

Not all of New Roots’ farmers were allowed into the private event, and one family living across the street showed its displeasure by displaying a sign that read, "Let the Growers In."

Eliza Steeple, 46, said her mother, Helen Jennings, should have been invited because she helped get the garden off the ground by providing electricity through a line that ran across the street from her house.

"It’s kind of disheartening," Steeple said. "I mean, look at us. We’re behind the fence."

Away from the event site, public-health specialists said it would be unwise to treat community gardens as insignificant.

"Those little plots of land are not just places where fruits and vegetables grow. They are islands of dialogue," said Dr. Chris Searles, a family physician and psychiatrist with the UCSD Medical Center and co-chairman of the San Diego County Childhood Obesity Initiative.

The gardens trigger discussions about food supplies, economic development and environmental sustainability, he said. They also provide a glimpse of the food chain beyond store shelves.

"For some kids, this is their first chance to see what it’s like to watch a tomato grow before it becomes ketchup," Searles said.

What makes the first lady’s initiative stand out from previous efforts is its direct tie to the power of federal policy, some observers said.

The president has included $345 million in his latest budget proposal for tax credits, loans and grants to establish grocery stores and fresh-food markets in underserved communities. Last week, a pair of lawmakers from New York announced legislation that would increase annual federal funding for healthy-food programs to $1 billion.
Last month, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention awarded a $16 million grant to local health and educational officials to promote nutritious eating and physical activity over the next two years.

Some of the money will be used to increase the number of community and school gardens, develop a food-distribution center for local farmers and expand a fresh-produce voucher program for the poor to five farmers markets.

ONLINE RESOURCES

letsmove.gov — Michelle Obama's "Let's Move" campaign

cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/obesity — U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

ccwsd.org — San Diego Childhood Obesity Initiative

sandiegoroots.org — San Diego Roots Sustainable Food Project

reverselchildhoodobesity.org — Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

nutritionforkids.com/10steps.pdf — Connie Evers' nutrition tips for children

Staff writers Jeanette Steele and Susan Shroder contributed to this report.

U-T Multimedia: For video of the first lady's visit, go to uniontrib.com/obama-visit. For photos go to uniontrib.com/michelle-garden

Online: For a map of the region's farmers markets and community gardens, go to uniontrib.com/farmers-markets

Caption: 1 PIC