

COVER STORY

How We Work with Youth

Reflections from the American Horticultural Therapy Association (AHTA) Community

WRITTEN BY

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Professionals across various sectors of society are increasingly concerned about the challenging times young people are facing. The modern world — shaped by extensive digital engagement, fast-paced routines, indoor-centric leisure and work, climate unpredictability, and a rapidly changing economy — has led to a dramatic rise in anxiety, depression, physical health challenges, social isolation, and difficulty maintaining focus.

The AHTA community understands the powerful role of horticulture and plant-rich spaces as therapeutic for fostering wellness in our youth. Many have been on the frontlines—both nationally and internationally -- of promoting holistic wellness for youth of different ages. This article highlights three AHTA members from varied backgrounds for their inspirational work in nurturing youth well-being and providing emerging generations with important life skills to fuel their futures.

SPOTLIGHT ONE

Bob Scarfo, BLA, MLA, Ph.D.*AHTA Member*

As a practicing landscape architect in Spokane, Washington, Scarfo has dedicated a significant portion of his career to working with youth. As a now retired Associate Professor at Washington State University, he initiated a collaboration with On Track Academy, a choice option school for high school juniors and seniors in the Spokane public school district. He continues to lead this partnership, supporting students through innovative educational opportunities.

Currently, Scarfo and his On Track Academy students are creating a forested environment, called “Meet Us at the Trees,” that will serve as an outdoor learning classroom for the Academy. At the very start of the design process, Scarfo asked his students to fully immerse in the plant-rich backdrop of the future outdoor classroom, paying attention to what comes up for them as they experience the natural surroundings of the site. Scarfo explained the rationale for this, citing John Simonds, an icon in the field of landscape architecture: “We design *experiences*, not places, spaces, or things,” he says. “The spaces, places, and things grow out of the experiences.”¹

In keeping with this, Scarfo prompted his students with reflective questions that would help them form a narrative about the forested site experience, such as: “What is going on in your minds as you approach the forested



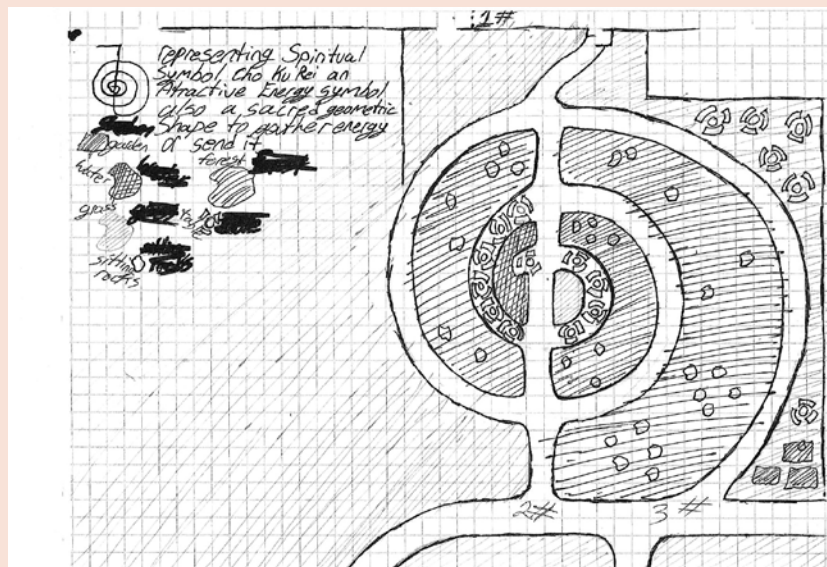
Autumn Anderson (foreground) and Adrian Brian discussed the meditative philosophy they used to develop the circular design seen here.

PHOTO BY BOB SCARFO

environment? What observations stand out? How can those impactful observations shape the direction of the ‘Meet Us at the Trees’ design?” One student sensed the energy and diversity of the forested environment, ultimately drawing up a concept plan for the project that incorporated this important aspect. Other students focused on different sensory aspects.

“We all read the landscapes we experience,” Scarfo said. When we take the time to understand the experiential narratives of the populations we design for, their stories naturally shape the design concept from the start, creating a more effective therapeutic landscape. This ensures that the individuals served – and their unique ways of perceiving and appreciating plant-rich environments – remain central to the important work of designing therapeutic green spaces.

Through the design of this forested environment classroom, Scarfo engages his students in compassionate and thoughtfully designed learning experiences that encourage them to create, build, connect, experiment and iterate, equipping them with essential life skills for the future. All of this takes place, while the students simultaneously gain the health benefits of outdoor learning, direct interaction with plants, sense of community, and immersion in an energy-restoring, plant-inspired environment.



Adrian Brian and Autumn Anderson's early design ideas that did contribute to the final Forested Classroom design.

PHOTO BY BOB SCARFO

¹ Simonds, J.O. (1961). *Landscape architecture: A manual of site planning and design* (p. 225). New York: McGraw-Hill.

SPOTLIGHT TWO

Katie Ryzhikov, OTR/L, HTR

AHTA Member

Ryzhikov specializes in working with children and adolescents whose activities of daily living are disrupted due to developmental, physical, cognitive, sensorimotor, or socioemotional concerns. Ryzhikov's expertise and commitment to using horticultural therapy (HT) and therapeutic horticulture (TH) to nurture young lives was particularly impactful when she had the opportunity to create a program for refugees, aged 13-17 years, in Texas.

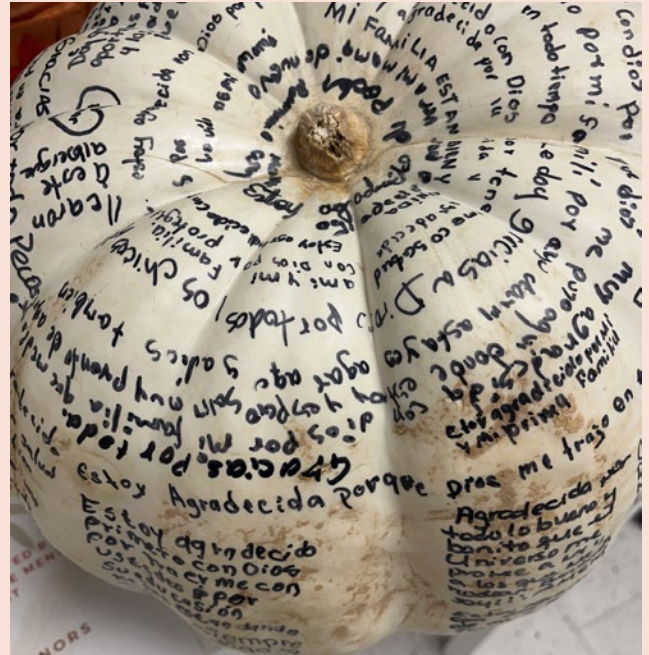
The migration journey can take a significant physical and emotional toll, especially on children. Migrants often encounter stressful, crisis-provoking, or traumatic events during their journey. Estimates suggest that 80 percent of migrants experience anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder. Importantly, the support individuals receive during, and in the immediate aftermath of a crisis often plays a crucial role in shaping its long-term impact on their lives. "Knowing that there is a strong relationship between creative expression and healing, we saw an opportunity to use creative, trauma-informed ways to deliver therapy to these at-risk youth," Ryzhikov explained.

The goal was to address key elements of immediate-to-midterm crisis intervention: promote safety, calm, self-efficacy, connectedness, and hope. If a child was identified with a significant health concern upon arrival or showed signs of poor mental well-being during their stay, they could opt in to the TH program.



Self portrait.

PHOTO BY KATARINA MORGAN



Gratitude pumpkin written by the kids at Thanksgiving.

PHOTO BY KATARINA MORGAN

The TH sessions occurred outdoors around the garden beds or inside a room filled with plants. The sessions provided youth with an engaging horticultural experience, offering moments of soft fascination and effortless attention, allowing the children to shift focus from their typical routine. The sessions were often creative, frequently encouraging the children to plant and nurture species native to their home country. This was deeply meaningful and beneficial to them for connection, identity, sense of community, and the act of planting new roots.

The TH program achieved its intended goals - fostering in youth a sense of healing, hope, empowerment, calm, self-expression, and a deeper connection to both cultural roots and their new home.



Woven roots activity - symbolizing setting down new roots.

PHOTO BY ELLA HAYSLETT

SPOTLIGHT THREE

Rich Matteo, HTR*AHTA Member*

Although today you can find Matteo in a state-of-the-art greenhouse, leading an HT program at a school for visually impaired children (aged 3-22 years) near Philadelphia, his journey started when he was a schoolteacher expecting his first child. He was teaching history and English while overseeing the school's garden club across the campus' expansive site. He loved "creating space for kids in [my] classroom to come, talk, smell plants, and be comfortable." Once he knew he was an expecting father, he thought hard about the career future he wanted. His research brought him to HT.

Matteo completed the HT professional registration process over four to five years while he was working full time. He completed his internship at Bryn Mawr Rehab during two consecutive summers prior to jumping into an HT career. His first HT job is the one he still holds today at the Overbrook School for the Blind. It was 2018 and the school had just completed a new greenhouse after years of fundraising. Though the school had a long-standing gardening program, when Matteo was hired to oversee



Making potpourri with student Nick.
PHOTO BY KATHRYN P. HEMSLEY

the school's HT program, he was handed the keys to an empty greenhouse.

Today, Matteo uses plant-based activities to aid students' therapeutic, wellness, and vocational goals. Matteo describes working with three visually impaired students during tomato-picking season, creating a little assembly line under a tomato bush. "[I] guide the kid's hand to the tomato; he pops it off the vine and hands it to the next kid. They love it. They can't tell if what they're doing is right or wrong. I just guide them in the process," he said. For older students preparing to graduate soon, Matteo leads vocational sessions such as completing tasks off a written checklist or selling garden products at campus events. While each day varies greatly based on the school's schedule, a typical day includes time for maintenance of the half dozen garden sites on campus, coordination meetings with other educators/staff, four or five structured sessions one-on-one or with small groups, and open house free time where students can drop in.

Leading a school-based HT program is one of many ways a person can have a career in HT working with youth. Many of the youth Matteo works with are medically complex, which gives Matteo great meaning in his work: "The beauty of what we do is that we take them away from their routine and give them something that they can take ownership of."



Atavia assembling a pinecone wreath.
PHOTO BY KATHRYN P. HEMSLEY

More spotlights on our hard-working member-base will continue to be offered in various media forms throughout the year as part of the AHTA 'Growing Impact' Campaign: Advancing Youth Wellness Through Horticulture. Our goal is to share expertise, work together, and take action to cultivate a healthier, more mindful future for our youth.

