

A Young Farmer Helps His Community

North Kingstown native gives back to Hasbro Hospital



By 9 a.m. the temperature is already heading north of 90 degrees.

But Ethan Lehnertz is undeterred.

The soon-to-be middle schooler makes his way out to a massive garden next to his family's house in North Kingstown, ready to pick. On this Saturday morning it's tomatoes, zucchini, squash, beets, peppers and eggplant.

From there it's a short walk to the makeshift vegetable stand at the front of his family's property on Shermantown Road where Ethan will more than likely sell out by the end of the day.

If you look closely at the stand you'll see a contest going on this summer. Ethan will donate half of everything he makes to either Hasbro Children's Hospital or the North Kingstown Food Pantry.

What most people who stop by *don't* know is that Ethan was mauled by two pit bulls when he was in first grade. He wound up in the pediatric intensive care unit at Hasbro after undergoing eight hours of surgery. The doctors stopped counting at 500 stitches.

And in the uncluttered logic of a 10-year-old: they helped him so he wants to help them. But, it turns out, this philanthropist is also somewhat of a businessman. Ethan's mom, Terri, says when they began the garden five years ago the family was giving away all of the extra vegetables they couldn't eat themselves.

"He was saving up for LEGO set. He really wanted this fancy LEGO set and I said there's no way I want to pay - whatever - for this huge LEGO set," Terri Lehnertz said, laughing. "So I said, 'Save up your money and you can buy it.'"

So Ethan started charging a nominal amount for the vegetables, but from the get-go wanted to give half of the profits away, even if it meant having to save a little longer to get the LEGOs. He learned about

hunger at school and how the local food pantry needs help, especially in the summer months. Last year he used the \$200 he made to buy meal boxes from Stop & Shop and delivered them to the food pantry.

The garden is a pretty efficient operation. Ethan's dad, Mike, rototills, mom plants and weeds, and Ethan picks and sells. The family didn't set out to open up a vegetable stand when they moved here. But Terri grew up in Little Compton and always had a garden, so she started one at the new house.

"You know, you get carried away. You go to Shartner's, you go to Walmart, to Home Depot, you see all of these plants and you think, 'I have a big area. I have the room, I'll just plant that.' My husband's not a vegetable person, Ethan is somewhat in between, and I love them. We started picking and we were giving away to everyone - our friends, family, everyone. I'd drop off vegetables at people's houses randomly."

Ethan added, "We started to get more stuff than we could eat, so we decided to start selling it."

"Sometimes they'll leave notes, sometimes they'll leave requests, like, 'Can you please put something below the table and I'll come by and pick it up?'" Terri said.

And what's most popular?

"It really varies. Every year I try something different, so this year I'm trying beets and Brussels sprouts for the first time. I've never done that before," Terri said. "Last year and the year before, I think I tried different colors of eggplant, pink and white. So it seems like the odd things sometimes get taken right away."

We asked Ethan if he ate any of the vegetables, or if he had a favorite.

"Peas," came the simple response.

Ethan makes sure everyone stopping by casts a vote for Hasbro or the food pantry. He tells us Hasbro is winning by a two-thirds margin. Ethan says although the hospital is free to use the money however it sees fit, he's had a few suggestions in the past.

"I like that they had double popsicles when I went for surgery, so I told them to get double popsicles and games."

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