

## Salad with a Mission

**M**ilestone Centers, Inc. is a private, nonprofit agency serving needs of individuals with behavioral and intellectual challenges throughout western Pennsylvania. According to Kate Bayer, Milestone's Director of Development & Marketing, "In 1998 many state mental health facilities and community homes were closing. Former residents of those facilities were used to working in greenhouses that served as therapeutic work environments." Given the healing nature of this horticultural work, Milestone sought a suitable location to develop its own greenhouse enterprise. "The nearby Yough River Trail Gardens were a visible site," explains Bayer, "based on an economic impact study conducted by the University of Pittsburgh and The Progress Fund."

The goal of Milestone's hydroponic greenhouse is to employ people with behavioral and intellectual challenges to produce a wide variety of specialty greens for sale to local wholesalers, specialty markets and restaurants, while providing the agency with a sustainable social entrepreneurial business.

"In 2001, while investigating a greenhouse operation, we thought it would center on ornamental plant production," continues Bayer. "However, after a feasibility study was conducted, which included regional restaurant demand, our consultants helped develop a business plan around hydroponic lettuce."

Construction of the 3,000 square foot greenhouse was completed in the fall of 2006 with first harvest taking place the following year. Milestone is currently producing four varieties of lettuces including bib, Waldmans red and green and Lola Rosa loose-leaf lettuces. The lettuce is being marketed under the brand name "Milestone Specialty Produce."

At present, the greenhouse is producing approximately 2,000 heads of lettuce per week while employing one full-time delivery driver and one part-time worker in charge of planting, harvesting and packaging.

Milestone's production has piqued the interest of many chefs in the region and the agency is currently selling at whole-

*An inside look at the 3,000 square foot greenhouse operation producing a variety of fresh, hydroponic lettuces.*



**MILESTONE SPECIALTY PRODUCE**  
*Experience Our "Sea of Green"*

**HYDROPONIC LETTUCE**  
**NOW AVAILABLE FOR RETAIL!**  
**Lettuce that is ALIVE . . . Until YOU Put it on the Table!**

Our lettuce is produced year-round using state-of-the-art hydroponic technology and sustainable agricultural practices. Best of all, it's grown locally in the area's only hydroponic greenhouse providing employment and training to people with behavioral and intellectual challenges.

For information and orders, contact:  
Kate Bayer, 412-371-7391, ext. 116, or by e-mailing:  
[kbayer@milestonecentersinc.org](mailto:kbayer@milestonecentersinc.org)  
Or visit our website at: [www.milestonecentersinc.org](http://www.milestonecentersinc.org)

sale to Paragon Monteverde, whose end purchasers include Eat'n Park Hospitality Group, big Burrito Restaurant Group. "Paragon has been with us since the beginning of our production and has been very encouraging," says Bayer.

Elaine Bellin, President of Paragon Monteverde mentioned "About five years ago Kate approached us about helping Milestone and Paragon made a usage commitment that was crucial in the early stages. I believe because of my personal commitment and belief in helping to get local agriculture started in Western PA, the program was born."

In effort to increase their customer base and retail sales, Milestone created a "Salad Club." Bayer explains, "It is a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program for lettuce. A \$50 subscription fee covers 13 weeks of lettuce. We offer five drop-off locations in the Allegheny county area." Bayer also notes "We are also looking for more caterers and hotels who are interested in using our lettuce."

In a recent Salad Club members' survey, 65% of the subscribers noted the social mission of Milestone made a difference in their decision to participate. "Our greenhouse not only provides a paycheck to our employees, but also a therapeutic work environment to the individuals who need it the most," continues Bayer. "This is a specialty service unique to Milestone and we have receive nothing but positive feedback."

To add Milestone Specialty Produce as part of your menu, contact Kate Bayer at [kbayer@milestonecentersinc.org](mailto:kbayer@milestonecentersinc.org), 412-371-7391, ext. 116, or visit [www.milestonecentersinc.org](http://www.milestonecentersinc.org). ■