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Store's open — and free

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Gaye Chan, left, and Nandita Sharma set up their Free Store stand in Kailua on June 7. The store, which is accompanied by a common garden, offers a variety of objects and produce for free, inspired by the 17th-century "diggers" movement in England.

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KAILUA — Two local university professors have launched their own version of a 17th-century economic experiment, giving away produce and goods at a free garden and store on Keolu Drive.

Gaye Chan and Nandita Sharma, the giveaway takes its inspiration from the "diggers" movement, said Chan, a photography professor at the University of Hawai'i.

According to Wikipedia.org, the movement sprung up in England in 1649 when several individuals began to plant vegetables in common land in the county of Surrey at a time when food prices reached an all-time high. They invited others to join them in using the common land, which alarmed authorities, and the "diggers" eventually were driven away, the Web site said.

"The purpose of all of these projects really is to demonstrate to people that it is possible to live outside of the market system," said Sharma, a sociology professor at York University in Toronto, Canada. "The goal is to demonstrate self-sufficiency."

The food will come from a "common garden" that was planted without permission outside a fence of a vacant lot that belongs to Kamehameha Schools. The 8-by-4-foot plot has a variety of vegetables and herbs, but harvest seems months away. Along the fence young papaya trees about one to two feet tall grow.

Kamehameha Schools officials say they are aware of the garden and do not have plans to intervene.

The garden is in its early growing stages and contains about a dozen plants including lemon grass, basil, chili, grapes, cherry tomato and thyme. Signs name the plants; the spinach sign said it's good for cholesterol. The 'ilima sign said the plant was not for eating.

A notice at the garden informs people that the food is free to all and asks people to help care for the plants by watering and weeding. New additions are welcomed. Organic fertilizer will be applied once a month, the notice says.

The Free Store, a small stand on the front lawn of a home several hundred feet from the garden, offered a variety of items for the taking this week, including a suitcase, spider lily seed pods, sprouting plants and containers. There was box marked Free Money and a basket to drop off or pick up HI-5 cans and bottles.

People walking by said the selection at the store changes daily and may include fresh-picked herbs, papaya plants, a working power saw and hanging baskets. People bring things to the store as well as take what is there.

Albert Wong, 59 and training for a marathon, said more people should operate free stores, giving away their discarded or unwanted things rather than tossing them in the trash. Wong said he's taken several things from the store and has gotten to know the people who operate it.

"This is something that brings people together," he said, adding that people are invited to help in the garden on certain days.

Two young girls, Ashley Ko, 7, and her sister Rachel, 4, come by at least three times a day to collect cans or bottles left by others, Chan said.

Ashley Ko said she gives the cans and bottles to the family of their friend Hannah.

"Hannah is sick and they collect the cans," Ashley Ko said, adding that she's not sure how many cans she's collected. Chan said she thought it was hundreds.

People are responding to the project and many support it, Sharma said.

The professors' first attempt at creating a common garden two years ago failed when the site, planted with papaya trees, was mowed down, presumably by the property owner, Chan said. But the new garden, growing outside the fenced area and in the public right of way, seems to have at least tacit approval from the school.

Whoever cut down the garden did give the women a warning and they said they noticed an apologetic tone in the note left at the garden that said the plants would be removed.

Kekoa Paulsen, spokesman for Kamehameha Schools, said the school's property inspector has been aware of the garden for several weeks. The plantings will be monitored and maintained like any of the other school's property, Paulsen said.

"At this point the plantings do not pose any obstruction to the public access or safety on the walkway," he said. "However if they do grow to the point when they hang over the sidewalk or present any kind of public risk they will be removed. That's just the normal procedure on our properties."

Paulsen said the school is working with Kailua Bay Advisory Council and the Enchanted Lakes Residents Association to restore native plants on the school's property inside the fence.

Chan said their use of the land comes from a political and philosophical belief that the planet and the people on the planet would benefit most from the common

property rather than from private property or state owned public property.

"Our position is we do not ask permission because we refuse to acknowledge that they have authority over land because we insist that land can be shared," Chan said.

Meeting, talking to and learning more about their neighbors has been a benefit of the project, Chan said.

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