

PROVIDER SPOTLIGHT

DIANA MERCADO

Pirulo's Child Care and Learning Center



Seedlings and Self-Care: Diana Mercado's Journey with Let's GROW Outside!

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When Diana Mercado applied to [DIEEC's Let's GROW Outside!](#) initiative on behalf of [Pirulo's Child Care and Learning Center](#), she saw a great educational opportunity for the children. However, she also had another motivation: self-care.

Diana is the early childhood administrator at Pirulo's, a bilingual program that serves children from ages 1 to 5. Founded in 2007, Pirulo's is nestled on a grassy hillside overlooking Beck's Pond Park in Newark. Diana takes pride in the strong community built at Pirulo's, especially for Spanish-speaking families. As a bilingual program, they can support parents who may struggle with English when communicating about their children's development and accessing needed support. It's a reciprocal learning experience: Diana says, "Some children don't communicate in English, so we are teaching them English. And then the children who do not speak Spanish, we are teaching them Spanish." The program's sense of community serves as a strong foundation for the gardening initiative.

Diana is from the Dominican Republic, where fresh vegetables, fruits, and herbs are emphasized in cooking. She grew a garden on her own, saying, "I did it just to do it," for the purpose of having plenty of fresh produce available. But she also discovered along the way that she enjoyed gardening. She viewed the gardening experience provided by Let's GROW Outside! as not just an educational opportunity, but a potential for respite in a job that can sometimes be as stressful as it is rewarding. This perspective extended to the children: in a time when many children spend hours each day in front of screens, Diana wanted them to enjoy being outside too, to benefit from time spent "in nature...breathing, the birds flying over, hearing the sounds."

With the support of the Let's GROW! Outside initiative, Diana has led Pirulo's in transforming a patch of grass near the bottom of the hill into a thriving garden classroom. Let's GROW Outside! is a grant-funded opportunity to make an edible garden come to life. Participating educators learn about the benefits of connecting children and gardening, gain knowledge and skills needed to develop and sustain a garden, learn to use a supplemental gardening curriculum, and plan for age-appropriate garden activities with children. Diana used the provided supplies to build a functional and visually appealing garden, creatively re-purposing some of the provided wire fencing to fashion a garden arch and trellis, and dedicating one bed to a fairy garden for the children. Raised beds are complemented by potted plants, and edible plants are complemented by flowers. Child-size aprons, gardening tools and watering cans are neatly stored and easily accessible next to the garden plot.



To optimize children's experience, Diana works with a few children at a time to tend the garden. "They are watering, seeing the harvest grow, touching everything." The children, in turn, are excited and eager to help. The program's playground is located higher on the hill, overlooking the garden. Diana says that when she is in the garden, children on the playground will call to her: "'Miss Diana! Come get me, Miss Diana. Is it my turn now? I wanna go to the garden. I wanna garden, I wanna help!"

While Diana took the lead on the Let's GROW! Outside initiative, it has been a program-wide effort. The gardening experience comes indoors as well- seeds are started in the classrooms, and educational toys and stories help introduce children to concepts like plant life cycles. Diana shares a monthly update on the garden with families, who in turn have offered to donate seeds and to help build the garden beds on weekends. Some families grow their own tomatoes or windowsill herbs, and Diana says it's exciting to see children make connections between what they learn in the Pirulo's garden and what they have at home.



The children at Pirulo's have learned that the worms they encounter while digging are friends that help improve the soil for their plants. They know that bees are also garden helpers. Diana says that seeing a tiny eggplant form and grow has been a source of wonder for one child. The children are also learning responsibility as they take turns and understand that the garden needs regular care in order to thrive. As for Diana, her favorite plants are the strawberries: "It's a victory. I nailed it. There were just the green leaves, but then I started seeing the flowers. Then my heart just started pumping. I was like, I'm gonna get strawberries this year!"

Diana's journey with Let's GROW Outside! illustrates how personal passion can intersect with educational impact, benefiting both educators and children. For Diana, the initiative was not only a chance to create a thriving garden classroom at Pirulo's Child Care but also a valuable opportunity for self-care, providing rewarding personal growth in the context of her busy role. The garden fosters a deeper connection to nature, responsibility, and community among her bilingual learners and their families. With the guidance of a dedicated educator, children are growing in curiosity, confidence, and an understanding of the world around them.

Let's GROW Outside! will welcome a new cohort of educators this fall;
applications will open on September 15.