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**January 25, 2010**

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**USC Childhood Obesity Research Center teams up with  
Milagro Allegro Community Garden to offer nutrition, cooking, and gardening class to Latino  
Youth in Cypress Park**

**HIGHLAND PARK (Los Angeles)** – Solving the problem of childhood obesity is a top goal of a new after school program that will be piloted starting Jan. 26, 2010 at the Milagro Allegro Community Garden in Highland Park, a community in northeast Los Angeles. LA Sprouts, a partnership between the Keck School of Medicine of the University of Southern California Childhood Obesity Research Center (USC-CORC) and the Los Angeles Unified School District's Loreto Elementary School in Cypress Park, seeks to reduce the risk of obesity and encourage healthy eating habits in children by teaching gardening, nutrition and cooking.

Nearly 32 percent of children ages two to 19 are considered overweight or obese, and one in three children born since 2000 is at risk for developing diabetes in their lifetime. Teaching children about growing, cooking and eating healthy fruits and vegetables is a constructive and creative, yet simple approach to solving the epidemic health problem of obesity. A community garden provides access to fresh and nutritious foods that are often unavailable in urban communities, and by growing food themselves, children build self-reliance, which can lead to future successes.

For 12 weeks, LA Sprouts, a collaborative effort by USC-CORC, the Milagro Allegro Community Garden, UC Extension Common Ground program, and LA's BEST, aims to teach nutrition, cooking, and gardening principles to fourth and fifth graders at LAUSD's Loreto Elementary School. The two-hour biweekly program will be taught Tuesday and Friday afternoons at the garden and will include monthly trips to the Old LA Farmer's Market in Highland Park. USC will assess the impact of this program on a number of health outcomes in the students, including childhood obesity, blood pressure, dietary intake and other nutritional behaviors related to healthy eating, data which is notably lacking in this area and critical to evaluate the effectiveness of such garden-based programs.

This program aims to help children lose weight or maintain a healthy weight, motivate them to eat more fruits and vegetables, improve resources, teach them to prepare and eat healthier meals, and reinforce positive perceptions of cultural foods. USC-CORC plans to use this program as a template for the development of similar programs in the area.

In addition to the nutrition/cooking component of the classes led by staff from USC-CORC, gardening curriculum will be taught by master gardeners from the University of California Cooperative Extension "Common Ground" program, with assistance from Homegirl Café. Art Center College of Design in Pasadena designed and constructed a mobile kitchen island for the program. The South Central Farmers will supply fresh organic produce for the cooking classes. Whole Foods Market Arroyo will supply cooking staples, cleaning supplies, and kitchen utensils promoting more plant-based, whole food options, as part of their larger commitment to the community and healthy eating education. Funding for LA Sprouts is provided by a Community Benefit Grant from Kaiser Permanente. The Cypress Park Neighborhood Council has committed funds for Gold Line passes for students. The North Figueroa Association will provide vouchers that may be used by students at the Old LA Farmer's Market in Highland Park. Slow Food Los Angeles has also contributed to the program and is continuing the partnership that began last year when Milagro Allegro Community Garden hosted one of the Slow Food "Time for Lunch" events aimed to improve food served in schools.

#### **About the Organizations Involved:**

**Milagro Allegro Community Garden:** Founded in 2009 by USC graduate, Nicole Gatto, the Milagro Allegro Community Garden uniquely integrates urban farming, art and education in the heart of the Highland Park neighborhood in Northeast LA. The mission of Milagro Allegro is to be a center of peace and beauty in the community where the cultivation of vegetables, fruits and flowers as well as creative ideas, artistic expression and neighborly values may take place. The garden features 32 raised bed plots and currently accommodates over 40 families from the community; three plots are dedicated to educational purposes. The garden also includes a community gathering circle where classes, workshops and events are held.

**USC Childhood Obesity Research Center:** Founded and led by Michael Goran, PhD, the Childhood Obesity Research Center (CORC) of the Keck School of Medicine of USC is one of the nation's leading research teams addressing childhood obesity. The mission of the USC-CORC is to understand childhood obesity and its related conditions, to examine its relationship to minority health, and to develop novel strategies for prevention and treatment. The USC-CORC's vision is a multidisciplinary one, believing that the best approach includes efforts from all angles, including clinical, behavioral, and environmental perspectives.

**University of California Cooperative Extension Common Ground Program:** Since 1978, UC Cooperative Extension's Common Ground Program has made gardening possible for many LA County residents, particularly low-income and traditionally underrepresented families. The program goals are to improve nutrition, increase access to fresh, low-cost produce, offer gardening education, build bridges between neighbors and communities, help create employment opportunities, and encourage a cleaner, greener Los Angeles. Master gardeners trained by Common Ground provide free gardening workshops and their technical expertise to approximately 60 public community gardens, hundreds of school gardens, and many senior and shelter gardens throughout LA County.

**LA's BEST** was founded in 1988 to address an alarming rise in the lack of adequate adult supervision of children during the critical hours between 3 and 6 p.m. This after school program serves 28,000 kids at 180 elementary school sites in Los Angeles, including Loreto Elementary school. The mission of LA's BEST is to provide a safe and supervised after school education, enrichment and recreation program for elementary school children ages 5 to 12 in the City of Los Angeles.