

SUSTAINABILITY HERO

July 2020



Valerie Brown

Program Coordinator, Camden County Office of Sustainability
and Member, Sustainable Voorhees

Since 2016, Valerie Brown has served as the program coordinator for the [Camden County Office of Sustainability](#), where she manages the impressive greenhouse program and is at the forefront of many innovative sustainability demonstration programs housed at the Lakeland Eco-Complex. As the vice chair of the Voorhees Township Environmental Commission and a member of [Sustainable Voorhees](#), Valerie was instrumental in helping the Township achieve silver-level certification. Voorhees Township is one of six municipalities that have achieved this level of certification in Camden County.



Valerie contributes to her South Jersey community by volunteering her time and sharing her sustainability expertise. She is a steering committee member for the [Tri-County Sustainability Alliance](#) (Tri-CSA), one of the ten [Sustainable Jersey regional hubs](#). To inspire and connect local green teams, she leads the annual Tri-CSA green team capacity-building meeting which is always a stand-out event. She was appointed to the [Public Participation Task Force](#) for the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission and is a [Rutgers Camden County Master Gardener](#).



Known for her dedicated pursuit of sustainability and compassionate leadership, Valerie is a standout sustainability hero in New Jersey. “Everything we do, even seemingly small acts, can have a positive impact on the environment,” Valerie explained. “I tell the people I work with not to get overwhelmed by our big challenges. Everyone should do what makes sense for them. I have hope for the future. Giving up is definitely not an option.”



Voorhees Township—Sustainable Jersey Silver-Certified: The Voorhees Green Team, or Sustainable Voorhees, is a subcommittee of the Voorhees Township Environmental Commission. Voorhees Township received bronze-level Sustainable Jersey certification in 2013 and then advanced to silver-level certification in 2016 and 2019. To read the completed certification actions, review the [Voorhees Township 2019 Sustainable Jersey Certification Report](#).



Voorhees Township Visioning Grant: In 2019, Voorhees Township received a \$10,000 Sustainable Jersey grant funded by the PSEG Foundation to do a visioning process. The implementation schedule has slowed due to COVID-19 social distancing requirements, but community focus groups are planned to identify the sustainability actions that are of the highest importance and feasible for the governing body and community to complete. Valerie explained, “We’re excited to begin this work because we

want our mission and projects to match what the community wants. It's important to listen to our residents, businesses and stakeholders so we will have a greater impact and in turn, increased support." The visioning process will develop short and long-term sustainability goals to guide the upcoming projects.

Camden County Community and Hydroponic Greenhouses:

Valerie is the operator and manager of the Camden County Office of Sustainability's community and hydroponic greenhouses. Through support from the Camden County Board of Freeholders, the County's Office of Sustainability manages a ten-acre site called the Camden County Lakeland Eco-Complex. The Eco-Complex is an innovative hub for community gardening and environmental education programs. Sustainable Camden County partners with the Camden County Rutgers Master Gardeners, green teams and environmental commissions throughout the county to supply the expertise and volunteer labor needed to care for the plants.



In addition to coordinating the operations, Valerie gets her hands dirty working in the three onsite greenhouses (traditional, perennial and hydroponic). The hydroponic greenhouse program enables the county to grow a variety of fruits and vegetables year-round without soil. The county showcases five types of hydroponic systems to spotlight the different methods that the community can use. Some of the popular methods of hydroponics are Ebb and Flow, Deep Water Culture, Nutrient Film Technique (NFT), and Aeroponics. Plant roots need water/moisture, nutrients and oxygen. The hydroponic systems differ in how they deliver these three things to the plants roots. Valerie is currently growing a variety of microgreens and lettuces using the Ebb and Flow system and select tomatoes and cucumbers using a vertical Dutch-bucket system.

"Ultimately, our mission is to create a place to produce locally-grown fruits and vegetables in an environment where food safety, nutrition and water conservation are the key principles to combating food deserts in low-income urban areas, and where people of all walks of life and all levels of ability can actively participate in a Sustainable Camden County and Rutgers Master Gardener collaboration to improve the community's well-being," Valerie said. This mission has grown in importance since the COVID-19 pandemic impacted food supply chains.

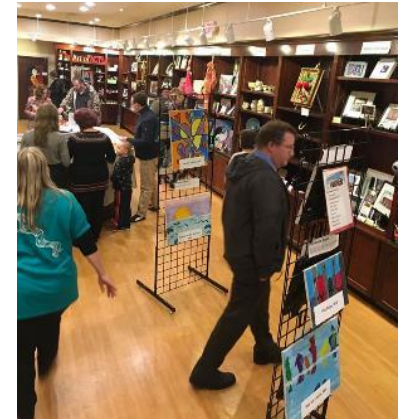
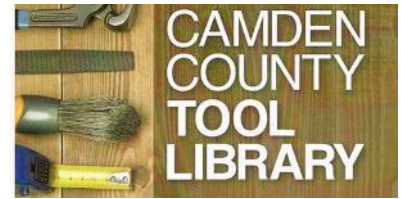
The produce grown in the greenhouses is used to supply lunches for the Camden County Senior Services program, Cathedral Kitchen and the Neighborhood Center in Camden. It also generates revenue, for example Camden County College and Cooper House Restaurant are regular customers. Annuals and perennials are grown and supplied to the Camden County parks. Approximately 15,000 plants grown in the greenhouses save the County over \$10,000 annually. The Office of Sustainability even partnered with the Philadelphia Zoo to sell leafy greens to the zoo's animal nutrition program.



Sustainable Camden County's to-do list is ambitious. Valerie said that a single-acre vineyard is in the works and a viticulture program is planned in partnership with Camden County College. The Lakeland Eco-Complex also has green infrastructure projects, renewable energy demonstration sites, composting/food waste collection, a nature explore outdoor classroom, a Christmas tree rental program, a monarch butterfly waystation and beekeeping. The county has commenced construction on a 5,000-square-foot building which will have a kitchen and classroom/learning area for educational programs.



Camden County Tool Lending Library: Valerie manages the [Camden County Tool Lending Library](#). All of the tools have been donated by residents. Valerie said, “Lending libraries are a good way to promote re-use and reduce waste. The Tool Library is great if you need a tool. For example, if you need a chainsaw or a drill, you can become a member and borrow a tool.” The county is also hoping to start a dish library to lend dishes and supplies necessary for big events and a toy library, which would allow parents and children to visit the location to play with new and gently used toys.



Voorhees Art Center and Gallery: In 2017, the [Voorhees Arts Council](#) was formed as an evolution of the Sustainable Voorhees Creative Team. Valerie is proud of the role that Sustainable Voorhees had in developing this initiative that has brought arts alive in Voorhees. It is an excellent example of the role that green teams can play in fostering creative culture in their communities. Marianne Leone, the chair of the Voorhees Arts Council, is responsible for spearheading the program that has grown from art exhibits in vacant storefronts to having a home in a former Yankee Candle store at the Echelon Mall. The Voorhees Art Center and Gallery has thirty artists in residence and provides a public place for visitors to see the artwork and participate in community events. With this initiative, Voorhees Township successfully completed three of the five Sustainable Jersey Arts and Creative Culture actions: [Establish a Creative Team](#); [Creative Assets Inventory](#) and [Municipal Commitments to Support Arts and Creative Culture](#).

Voorhees Township Complete Streets Policy: Sustainable Voorhees members were concerned about bicyclist and pedestrian safety as well as traffic congestion. After a technical advisory commission was formed, check-lists were adopted and plans developed, Voorhees Township implemented a [Complete Streets policy](#). Participants involved in developing the policy included Sustainable Voorhees, Voorhees Township, the [Cross-County Connection Transportation Management Agency](#) and various stakeholders. With the addition of bike lanes, cross walks, signage and speed tables, Voorhees has successfully reduced speeds, improved visibility of bicyclists and pedestrians and improved motorist awareness. In addition to better safety, a greater reliance on bikes and walking as forms of transportation translates to reduced greenhouse gas emissions from vehicles and improved health from increased physical activity. Bike lanes, sidewalks, bike racks and transit shelters have been added since the policy adoption, and more ideas are in the works. With this policy, Voorhees Township completed the Sustainable Jersey action: [Adopt a Complete Streets Policy](#).

More About Valerie: Valerie is a South Jersey girl. She grew up in Cherry Hill, attended Cherry Hill East High School and Rutgers University Camden and is raising her family in Voorhees Township. She received a BA in Biology from Rutgers University-Camden and spent two summers working at the [New Jersey Pinelands Commission](#), an independent state agency whose mission is to preserve, protect and enhance the natural and cultural resources of the Pinelands National Reserve. Valerie worked for six years at the [New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection](#) as a senior environmental specialist. She was responsible for scientific investigations including field and office studies associated with freshwater wetlands delineations and assessments. Valerie is an accredited LEED Green Associate with the U.S. Green Building Council.



For Valerie, the value that reigns supreme is family. She is the youngest of seven children, with five older brothers and a sister, and her husband, Jude, has five siblings. Valerie’s family gatherings are never a small affair and she likes it that way. Valerie and her husband have three children in their twenties. She said her children are supportive of her sustainability pursuits, although they affectionately refer to her as the ‘plant lady’ and have been known to call her gardening friends the ‘plant heads.’ In her free time, Valerie likes to garden, bicycle and spend time outdoors hiking or at the Jersey shore.