FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: 6/2/22

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HEART Partners with the Queens Borough President’s Office to Promote Food Justice for All Through Service Learning in District 30 Schools

Humane Education Advocates Reaching Teachers (HEART) and the Queens Borough President’s Office are excited to announce their partnership this spring to bring the Compassionate Communities Award competition to elementary schools in Queens District 30. This contest is now in its 4th year of engagement with NYC schools, sharing an innovative approach to connecting classrooms and communities through humane education practices and resources that inspire respect, empathy, and social engagement.

HEART is a nonprofit public charity based in NYC dedicated to fostering a generation of compassionate youth who create positive change for people, animals, and the natural world. In recognition of one of the key struggles that has especially impacted many communities in Queens this year, the theme for our 2022 Compassionate Communities Award competition is Food Justice for All.

“Food insecurity has been a deep and real threat for Queens families going back years, well before the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this crisis. That’s why I’m proud to have funded school hydroponic farms across the borough and it’s why I’m excited to partner with HEART to help supplement the education of our students with critical lessons about fighting food injustice,” said Queens Borough President Donovan Richards Jr.

The pandemic has exponentially increased the degree of food insecurity in our local communities, as long lines at food banks have become a regular feature of so many neighborhoods in Queens and around the city, and people who have never before experienced food insecurity now find themselves in increasing need, but problems of inequity in access to healthy, affordable whole foods are long-standing, and have their roots in a food production system that privileges some while neglecting and exploiting others. Teaching about Food Justice means challenging students to explore and think critically about all aspects of our modern industrial agricultural and global food systems - which connect us through the food we eat to
countless other people, animals, and to many of the natural habitats that make up our world - and asking them to consider ways to make it more just, compassionate, and sustainable for us all. The *Compassionate Communities Award* program asks schools to teach about Food Justice issues as widely as possible within the school, then develop and implement service projects that address community needs and demonstrate some of the ways that inequities in our modern food systems affect the people, animals, and natural habitats in their neighborhood and world.

Schools will present the programs and projects they have worked on at an award ceremony being hosted by the Queens Borough President’s Office on June 15th, 2022. An esteemed panel of community leaders, including Queens Deputy Borough President Ebony Young and senior representatives from the office of NYC Mayor Eric Adams, will serve as judges in selecting the winners. HEART will be offering 1st, 2nd, and 3rd prizes of $4,000, $2,500, and $1,000, respectively, to the contest winners as a way of supporting their efforts to inspire a generation of compassionate changemakers and expand upon the work they have done in their *Compassionate Communities* programming.

Schools in District 30 have been working on developing and expanding learning and service actions to address food justice issues in their neighborhoods. Two schools have small hydroponics labs, where students are learning about alternative and more sustainable ways to grow food locally. They are hoping to expand this program in their schools and have exciting plans for ways to engage families in learning about the importance of a diet centered around whole, fresh foods, and sharing the produce they grow directly with the wider community. One school with an established school garden has been using it to teach about all of the critical ways that urban gardening enhances our communities and has been sharing its harvest with local food banks. They are hoping to be able to build a greenhouse so that gardening and food production can continue throughout the school year. Another school is planning to bring plant-based nutrition education to their students to support the new vegan Fridays initiative in NYC schools, with opportunities for students and parents to sample vegan options, explore the many global cultural traditions that feature plant-based foods, and participate in virtual family dinner nights, where families prepare and eat vegan meals together with ingredients and recipes provided in advance. From urban gardening, increasing access to farmers markets and mobile food trucks, to virtual visits with farm animals in upstate sanctuaries, District 30 schools are planning inspiring and meaningful ways to support their communities and to ‘grow’ a new generation of youth, who understand their deep connections to other living beings, and to the natural world they will soon be asked to steward into a rapidly changing climate.

We are proud to support the youth of Queens in taking steps toward building healthier, kinder, and more equitable communities and promoting Food Justice for All in their own neighborhoods and in the wider world.