Morris Heights — A group of seniors in the Bronx started their own farmers market this summer, bringing the first outdoor, locally-grown produce market to Morris Heights.

The Heights Community Farmers Market is managed by seniors from the nearby Heights Senior Center, on West Tremont Avenue, one of four senior centers in the Bronx run by the multi-service nonprofit BronxWorks.

Robert Moore, a community organizer for the group, said the farmers market is one of several ways the organization looks to reinvent the typical senior center experience — to have clients actively involved in hands-on projects "rather than have them sitting around doing nothing," he said.

"They're not just going to lunch and doing BINGO," Moore said. "They're actually getting involved and getting engaged."

The group scored a $70,000, three-year grant from the New York Community Trust to start a healthy eating program, and they decided to use it to bring more fresh food to the neighborhood.
"We went on a quest to see how can we start helping to change the minds of our community members in healthy eating," said Heights Senior Center program director Rosalina Luongo. "We noticed that we don't have any farmers markets here for people to get fresh produce."

The group started with a small farm stand at the center last fall, then decided to expand their reach with a full-fledged outdoor market this summer. They teamed up with the nonprofit Just Food, which gave 10 BronxWorks seniors a two-month training session on how to run and operate a farmers market, teaching them everything from how to navigate the government's many food benefits programs to the value of locally-sourced food.

The market features produce from two New York-area farms through nonprofit GrowNYC's New Farmer Development Project, which assists new immigrants in running farm businesses. Sweet corn, basil, cabbage and other vegetables hail from Fresh Radish Farm in upstate Goshen and from El Poblano Farm on Staten Island.

"This food doesn't have any pesticides — it's straight from the farmers," said 73-year-old market worker Betty Burts, as she rang up a customer buying ears of corn on the cob.

Burts has been coming to the Heights Senior Center since she retired from a security job last year, and said she liked helping run the farmers market because it lets her interact with members of the community, many of whom have become weekly regulars since the market started up in June.

"I'm a people person," Burts said.

The market accepts debit and credit card payments, food stamps, WIC Vegetables and Fruit Checks, the city's Health Bucks and other food benefit programs. BronxWorks provides a shuttle van to take clients from its senior centers and other locations to the market every week.

Barbara Middleton, a 68-year-old who lives near Yankee Stadium and helps run the market, said she shops there for herself every Thursday, stocking up on leafy greens.

"We don't have access to much fresh produce," she said of the neighborhood's supermarkets. "Sometimes you pick it up and it's brown."

Originally from North Carolina, Middleton said she enjoys working at the market because it reminds her of her youth growing up in south, where farm-fresh foods were the regular.

"I've been away so long, I forgot about it," she laughed.

The Heights Community Farmers Market is every Thursday, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., at at University Avenue and West 181st Street, on the corner of the Aqueduct Walk. It will run through Nov. 15. For more information, visit www.bronxworks.org.

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