A new garden path

By Carolina Wilson CWilson@SBTinfo.com | Posted: Wednesday, September 25, 2013 5:00 am

SOUTH BEND -- Volunteers and partners gathered at the skywalk connecting Century Center and the DoubleTree Hotel on Tuesday to begin transforming the passageway into a year-round herb garden.

At the core of the project is Green Bridge Growers, a startup business at Innovation Park at the University of Notre Dame. Co-founder Jan Pilarski, of South Bend, said that the mission of the business is dual-purposed.

"Our venture grows year-round food in a variety of methods for the South Bend community, but our social mission is also to employ a number of young adults with autism," Pilarski said.

Not too long ago, Green Bridge Growers used aquaponics -- a practice for raising fish and growing vegetables together in a closed-loop system -- to set up a system at Hannah and Friends, a local nonprofit organization that helps children with special needs.

The current project at the skywalk also demonstrates collaboration with community volunteers, Green Bridge Growers, Century Center and the DoubleTree, Indiana University South Bend's Center for a Sustainable Future and local contractors such as Foegley Landscaping and DMS Plumbing.

Mike Keen, director of Indiana University South Bend Center for a Sustainable Future, demonstrated whole-hearted support for the project.

"I was sitting at the Center for Sustainable Future with a couple of students and staff and we were talking about this skywalk and said, 'We have to turn this into a greenhouse.' Then we thought about it more and said, 'That's actually a great idea,'" Keen said. "When we discovered Green Bridge Growers, all the partners began coming together and we got really excited."

On Tuesday, some three dozen volunteers uprooted the tropical plants and old soil from the plant beds. Within the next two weeks, plumbers will install a drip irrigation system and the landscaping team will place the new organic soil. Once this has been done, the herbs will be planted.

DoubleTree Hotel General Manager Leonard Clifton said he is excited about the project and to be an integral part of this collaborative effort.

"The skywalk is such a great opportunity for a natural greenhouse," Clifton said. "We were very fortunate to find an organization like Green Bridge Growers, which not only has a lot of experience growing natural foods, but is also focused on helping autistic adults as a part of their everyday mission."
Pilarski said that although the startup costs for the garden installation came from a private donor, the Century Center and the DoubleTree will fund the upkeep of the skywalk garden.

"It's a really stunning walkway, but rather underutilized, and we saw so much potential," Pilarski said. "The DoubleTree has been integral to this because they see the skywalk as an area that leads from one part of South Bend to the other. They believe, like I do, that it can be transformed into something much more than it is."

Pilarski's autistic son, Chris Tidmarsh, shared that he has benefited greatly from being a part of Green Bridge Growers.

"I've really enjoyed working with Green Bridge so far," Tidmarsh said. "It's great to be able to provide this kind of work for people like me on the autism spectrum."

With local restaurants already expressing interest in the future herb garden, Pilarski feels that the project will fulfill its mission of serving the community.

"We really wanted to base our project in the community," Pilarski said. "We see it as a way to revitalize South Bend: its food and its autistic community."