

A Sustainable Community From the Soil Up

by Linda Sechrist

Somewhere between child's play and rocket science lie the solutions for preserving the future of our one-of-a-kind planet Earth and its natural resources. Fortunately, thousands of individuals are waking up to discover that just as R. H. Conwell suggested in *Acres of Diamonds*, the solutions are virtually in their backyard.

For the hundreds of resilient and innovative individuals that I, and my colleague, Sharon Joy Kleitsch, met in 10 cities throughout our month-long Stone Soup Listening Tour—"hope" for finding workable solutions for the future of our neighborhoods, towns, cities, and planet is now an action word. From San Diego, California to Spartanburg, South Carolina we found engaged citizens who were gathering together within their community, confidently conveying that as a thoughtful, committed, and intentioned group of people, they have the means and personal power to make a difference in the important issues impacting the health of the world they live in: their neighborhoods and communities. Whether or not they are collaborating with sustainability programs funded by American Recovery Reinvestment Act stimulus money or public/private partnerships, private citizens are involved in sustainable service work, which holds the potential for meeting their community's present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs.

No longer expending energy on "fixing" broken systems, passionate community activists are working together using proven principles of grassroots movements such as Transition Towns, Slow Money, Slow Food, Permaculture, and Buy Fresh, Buy Local. Additionally, principles of the Fresh Food Financing Initiative are being utilized to fund

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investments in healthy corner grocery stores that can provide access to healthy, affordable foods, which have a measurable impact on health.

While connecting the green dots on our tour, Sharon Joy and I found that Oklahoma City and Norman were teeming with energetic and enthusiastic individuals who have virtually created a parallel universe whose momentum is being fed by their thoughts, words, deeds and initiatives.

Rallying their friends, families, neighbors, local businesses, non-profit organizations and local government officials, these individuals are creating flourishing communities of practice that are engaged in exploring a more sustainable future, one that offers not only a good working model for other communities but also inspiration and hope for all.

Sustainable OKC

Dan Yates, president of the Sustainable OKC (SOKC), who grew up on a farm, admits that it didn't give him an advantage over city folks who are learning to grow their own food. "I learned my meager gardening skills at our gardening workshop in February," says Yates, who discovered the grassroots group while attending one of its monthly Green Drinks gatherings. "I became a board member because I was looking for non-profit work where I could use my association training."

SOKC, which began as a sub-chapter of the Oklahoma Sustainable Network, exists to spread the word about sustainability by educating individuals in fun ways on its various facets. From a monthly film series to a Fresh Green blog, Facebook Page, Oklahoma City Garden Share, or food preservation workshop, the organization uses whatever tools

it takes to help empower individuals who want to do whatever is sustainably important to them. "We're matchmakers who keep the sustainable conversation going."

Sustainable OKC, contact Dan Yates at dyates@gwpc.org.

Native Roots Market

Matt Runkle and Sara Kaplan, co-owners of Native Roots Market, weren't absolutely sure how a grocery store functioned before they opened their market, which offers seasonal, local, organic, ethical, and healthy foods as well as a variety of meats raised the old-fashioned way. But they were positively sure that they believed in the Slow Food movement and wanted to be part of Buy Fresh, Buy Local

and offer more than a once-a-month access to the kinds of fresh, tasty and nutritious foods that are distributed by the Oklahoma Food Co-op.

The two enthusiastic, quick studies are as passionate



Matt and Sara with J. B. Pratt at Native Roots

today as they were in 2006, when they first began stocking their shelves full of products and produce that allows every customer to make a healthy decision, no matter what they put in their cart or bag. "I could condemn people all day long for their bad food choices but shame and blame don't work," says Matt. Sara, who supports her husband's strategy for changing the way people eat, explains, "We didn't try to change the conventional shopping system; we simply built an attractive, parallel alternative to it that is in everyone's best interests. Proof that it works: quality produce in small batches from many different farmers sells itself and is a market-leader rather than the lost-leader that it generally is in conventional grocery stores.

Native Roots Market: 132 W. Main Street. Norman, OK 73069, 405-310-6300, NativeRootsMarket.com.

See ad on page 11.

The Earth Café & Deli

The Earth Natural Foods & Garden

When salad is so vividly colorful that it literally invites a fork to the bowl it's tossed in, and the taste of fresh explodes in every bite, then it's apparent that the restaurant and its staff deeply care about the dining experience it provides for customers. After the challenge of choosing a menu item, because every vegetarian and vegan food description pumped up the volume of our hunger pains, we Slow Food fans

waited patiently to satiate our taste buds. Not one was disappointed, except when the bowls and plates were empty.

Norman is lucky to have the Earth Café & Deli and we were fortunate to visit the Earth Natural Foods & Community Garden. One of the highlights of our day was taking in the beauty of the well-cared for and loved community garden. We found Richard Haas, stocking shelves in Norman's oldest health food and organic grocery store and marveled at the feel of his real neighborhood market that exudes the ideals of he and his wife, Kate. We were also delighted to discover that Richard offers his customers, who arrive by walking or riding a bike, a 10 percent discount.



Richard Haas at The Earth

The Earth Café & Deli: 750 Asp (Campus Corner), Norman, Ok 73069, 405-573-5933. The Earth Natural Foods & Garden: 309 S. Flood, Norman, OK 73069, 405-364-3551. See ad on page 37.

Oklahoma University

While backyard gardening, recycling, and the buy fresh buy local aspects of growing a greener economy are some of the sustainable practices that Mark Jensen practices in his personal life, it is the dollars and cents of sustainability that capture his academic attention. As a Program Specialist for Oklahoma University's Lean Institute, within the College of Continuing Education, Jensen specializes in green initiatives and administering Lean and Green Certification programs that look at waste from the perspective of the environment. "Lean helps businesses of all types to become greener by cutting costs through the elimination of waste, which costs them resources but adds no value to their customers," advises Jensen. The three-day program is funded as part of the Oklahoma Department of Commerce's Oklahoma Green Project. It is available at no cost to local businesses and includes hands-on field projects, workshops and closely coached activities that prepare the participant to demonstrate the ability to implement process improvement using Lean methodologies.

"We used Lean to find waste here at OU," says Jensen who notes that the University's energy savings for turning off the display lights on the campus's 376 vending machines was \$52,000 a year.

Oklahoma University: Dr. Marc Jensen, 405-325-9135, marc.jensen@ou.edu.



Busy in the kitchen at 105 degrees

105degrees Academy

A fashionably sophisticated and sleek retro ambiance wasn't what we were expecting at a vegetarian/vegan/raw and gluten free restaurant; but we got it at 105degrees. Few vegetarian/vegan restaurants raise the bar to such a high level with food and ambiance but by doing so it raised our expectations for living cuisine. After enjoying several delectable appetizers, we became convinced that no one could possibly go away disappointed. We sure didn't.

As much as possible, the restaurant uses produce from local organic growers. The food is prepared fresh daily, and the open kitchen allows the diner to watch the process. The nation's first state-licensed raw foods culinary academy concept comes from chef Matthew Kenney, co-owner and director of culinary arts and operations. Kenney was named one of Food and Wine magazine's Best New Chefs and pioneered the technique of preparing fresh foods at temperatures no higher than 105 degrees. Sharon Joy bought one of his cookbooks in the gift shop, and like every bedazzled fan, got Matthew to autograph it for her. As for me, I quietly sipped my delicious Ginger Tini (orange, lemon, ginger, agave and Sake) with Tina, our OKC Natural Awakenings publisher, knowing that the cookbook library in my kitchen is already far beyond what I'll ever realistically use in my lifetime if I keep doing these Stone Soup Listening Tours.



Sharon Joy, Matthew Kenney and Linda Sechrist

105degrees Academy: 5820 N. Classen Blvd. (Classen Curve), OKC, OK 73118, 405-842-1050, 105DegreesAcademy.com. **See ad on page 11.**



Matthew Kenney, co-owner and director of culinary arts and operations

OKC Sustainability Center Workgroup Brown Bag Luncheon

Sharon Joy and I, listened in on the third meeting of the OKC Sustainability Center Workgroup. This broad-based assemblage of 37, diligently working to locate a place to convene and coalesce individuals and organizations that are presently working towards a more sustainable OKC, is especially impressive not only for its wide range of talent but also because it includes individuals who work in all aspects of the larger Permaculture picture: built environment, tools and technology, culture and education, finance and economics, land tenure and community governance, land and nature stewardship, and health and spiritual well being. From OSU-OKC's Horticulture Department Chair to the Department of Environmental Quality's Sustainability Educator, Susie Shields, who is trained in Transition Towns programming, to the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma and OKC's Community Foundation as well as Natural Awakenings, which convenes the integrative health community, everyone is diligently focusing their talents and knowledge on ideas intended to capture the interests of OKC businesses and residents, who are concerned with everything from greening their homes and neighborhoods to farmers markets and backyard or community gardens to building a more vibrant economy and creating green jobs.

With an ambitious mission to demonstrate a working cooperative model of technology and tools for sustainable living and working systems such as Permaculture, rain-water capture and storage, greywater systems, composting, LEED certified construction, and renewable energy production, the group is tapping into the momentum presently in play. They are also planning to reach out beyond a physical building to teach individuals who aren't already singing in the "sustainable choir."

As Sharon Joy and I moved through Tucson, Santa Fe, Phoenix,



OKC Sustainable Workgroup Brown Bag Luncheon

Albuquerque, Oklahoma City and Tulsa, several patterns began to emerge. The first: sustainability is truly a "from the soil up" grassroots movement. The hotbeds of activity largely revolve around food and the flurry of present activity is around farmers markets, community gardens, backyard gardens, CSAs, new farm to table restaurants, and small healthy corner grocery stores in low-income neighborhoods.

The second pattern is that sustainable networks of individuals, who are making the most advances, are organized around Transition Towns programming. One of the most fascinating threads that wove through our Albuquerque, Oklahoma City, and Tulsa experiences was that the same Transition Towns team trained several of the individuals we met.

Prior to our arrival in OKC, we largely saw opportunities

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for citizens engaged in sustainable service work to close the gap that exists between their efforts and those of their local governments. However, we were re-energized by seeing a more collaborative model in OKC, where local government representation is being tapped in order to midwife a new more inclusive paradigm.

One of the most welcoming patterns Sharon Joy and I relished was the groundswell of younger generations who are adding their energy to the sustainability movement. Whether they are learning to grow their own food, shopping consciously, or forming young professional groups to collaborate for change, we met 20 to 30-somethings, who have chosen to be the architects of a vibrant and resilient parallel universe. They are not attempting to fix a broken system; rather they are operating in a whole new paradigm full of positive and inspirational stories, which Sharon Joy and I plan to post on our Stone Soup Listening Tour website, which is now under construction.

Overall, our road trip adventure gave us plenty of remarkable things to ponder including the vision that Thomas Jefferson had for civic engagement. His genius foresaw a future where everyone would be an everyday participant in the government of affairs, a member of one of its councils, great or small--not merely in a one-day election. It appears that Jefferson's vision has a healthy start-up in OKC.

Contact DEQ/Transition OKC, Susie Shields at Susie.Shields@deq.ok.gov



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