

happenings

Spring 2011



The Food Project

YOUTH. FOOD. COMMUNITY.

Boston

Lincoln

North Shore

Milestones: The Food Project Celebrates 20th Growing Season

Back in 1992, 20 teenagers got together with a handful of adults on a two-acre plot of farmland in Lincoln. That summer would prove to be The Food Project's inaugural growing season. Despite the start-up nature of the effort, they would produce 20,000 pounds of vegetables. Along the way, they renewed a vital connection to the land. The youth also built bridges of understanding, learning about and from peers they might never have met otherwise. They took the produce of their labor and shared it with people who had little access to farm-fresh food. This idea was powerful then and it remains so today.

As we kick off our 20th growing season, we take a look at our past, present, and future through the lens of relationships with people. A celebration of milestones, this issue features the reflections of founding staff member Cammy Watts. You'll also meet a longtime resident of Dorchester whose commitment to The Food Project is nothing less than inspiring. A resident of Lincoln explains how the needs of practicality and a vision for sharing combine to sustain his support. Dig into the articles and you'll meet a couple of duos at the heart of our farms and youth programs and learn about a 'revolution' that we've always been proud to be a part of.

These individuals stand for the multitude of others drawn to The Food Project for nearly 20 years. Their talents, energy, and commitment built The Food Project into what it is today.

Love of the Land Brings Two Farmers Together

One farmer is a New Englander who's lived in the northeast all his life, not counting his four years of college in Florida. The other was born and raised in Brazil, having come to the U.S. just two years ago to earn a master's degree in agriculture. The New Englander is a baseball fan who once played college ball. The Brazilian favors soccer, or futebol, and looks forward to the next World Cup, to be hosted by his homeland, one of the world's great soccer powers. Alongside these differences, these two farmers share a deep devotion to the land, and it is their commitment to farming it responsibly that brings Tim Laird and Pedro Ghirotti together at TFP.

Tim, our new director of agriculture, first got into farming in the summer of 1987, just after his junior year in college. "I worked at an organic farm on a whim," he said, and he's been at it ever since – with the exception of a couple years when he tried out other ways to make a living. Ironically, it was during one of those years that he was first introduced to The Food Project.

"In the summer of 1998, I volunteered for The Food Project, doing work on the West Cottage and Langdon Street lots [in Boston]," Tim said. He then worked for six years at Drumlin Farm, where TFP first got started 20 years ago. "I got to be good friends with The Food Project's Lincoln farm manager. We'd pick each other's brains and support each other in a lot of ways. I even helped build the Lincoln greenhouse. So, I've been involved with The Food Project for a while now." Officially, this summer will mark Tim's fourth as a member of our farm staff and his first as TFP's agriculture director. For Pedro, this summer will be his first with us serving as field manager, a post he takes over from Tim.

Pedro's path to farming was different from his predecessor's. It started with his studies in college, where he initially focused on urban issues. Disillusioned with the situation facing cities in Brazil, he shifted his focus to rural geography. Learning about land ownership and farming, and increasingly interested in challenges facing small farmers, he got the idea that organic farming may offer a path to economic sustainability.

"I knew a little about organic farming and thought this could be a solution for small farmers," Pedro said. "It's less reliant on the larger system [of farming] and can be sustainable for them within their own properties." This realization led him to study farming more closely, and after finishing college, he started farming himself. **This hands-on experience led Pedro to seek out more knowledge,** eventually landing at Michigan State University, where he studied sustainable vegetable production and organic soil management.

"When I finished... I applied to several farms," he said, including The Food Project. On learning more about the farming operations at TFP – the size of the Lincoln farm (31 acres), the CSA program, the youth involvement – he was sold. "This is exactly what I was looking for."



Pedro was also exactly who Tim was looking for. "When we interviewed Pedro," Tim said, "we got to talking about soil health and his eyes just lit up. **That's when I knew, this is the person we want!**"

In the brief time Pedro has worked here, he's already made important contributions. His one-year plan for increasing farm-wide fertility is already being implemented. And he's hard at work creating a five-year plan featuring more comprehensive composting and more aggressive cover cropping. "Pedro has helped focus our energy to this task," Tim said. "He's taken it on and really run with it."

Enhancing soil fertility will support the ability of TFP's Lincoln farm staff to meet their goals for this season. These include increasing per-acre yield and producing more consistent harvests even through dry spells that the weather might bring. "We also plan to diversify," Tim said. "We'll be planting about an acre's worth of strawberries, raspberries, blackberries, and rhubarb. And we'll also be growing more herbs."

As Tim and Pedro say, in organic farming, the name of the game is soil health. Their combined energies and expertise will help ensure that The Food Project continues to produce fresh fruits and vegetables while nurturing the health of our farmland for years to come.



The Food Project and Community Partners Stage North Shore Marathon Raised-Bed Building Days



In March, TFP youth and staff partnered with the Backyard Growers (BYG) Program of the Cape Anne Farmers' Market and The Open Door food pantry to stage marathon raised-bed garden building days. Powered by D.I.R.T. crews, the effort left impressive results: a whopping 26 new raised-bed gardens for residents of Gloucester and 10 additional beds built at The Open Door's facility for the pantry's gardening program.

James Harrison, The Food Project's North Shore regional director, said, "What is extraordinary about this project is that it is a group of local people and organizations collaborating to do together what none of us could have done alone."

The building marathon took place over two Saturdays on March 19 and 26. Along with building the new beds, about 35 cubic yards of compost were delivered. TFP and BYG also worked together to provide trainings to community members about raised-bed gardening. This reached more than 75 eager gardeners, including 26 families, 5 farmers from the Riverdale Youth Farm, 8 teachers and parents from Pathways for Children, Beeman School, and West Parish School as well as 4 BYG mentors.

"On two very busy Saturdays we started a backyard gardening revolution in downtown Gloucester!" - Lara Lepionka of BYG



Raised bed gardens offer one of the safest and most productive ways to grow vegetables for residents of areas where lead and other industrial pollutants have made soils unsuitable for local agriculture. For TFP, the marathon build days were part of our Build-a-Garden program, through which we build raised beds for individuals residing in certain areas of greater Boston. Through this collaboration, the BYG Program is meeting its goal of reaching more neighborhoods and families of Gloucester.

We all see this partnership as an incredible opportunity to help local gardeners safely grow good, healthy food at home.

Grateful Farewells

Director of Community Programs Cammy Watts was here at the very beginning, when The Food Project took root on a two-acre plot of land at Drumlin Farm. In the fall of 1991, working as an environmental education teacher, she learned about an intriguing new idea. Youth from different communities would be brought together on the land. They would learn how to grow food while learning about each other. They would bring the food they'd grown to hunger relief organizations. She soon saw that this would be a "dream combination" for her. "I realized that I would love to do this," she recalled. **So she joined The Food Project as a founding staff member, as an administrative assistant – the first of many hats she would wear over the next 20 years.**



The first growing season took place the following summer, in 1992. Virtually every aspect of the inaugural summer program was different from what it is today. It was much smaller, with only 20 youth taking part. It was also divided into two sessions, each lasting four weeks. "This made it challenging [instructionally] because some of the youth stayed for the whole summer," she said, while others started with the second session.

None of the youth took food home with them, since they didn't know what to do with it, much less how to cook it. The staff also struggled to create safe spaces for the youth, showing the limits of their initial lack of experience. Cammy also recalled the day when the staff saw one of the youth playing volleyball with a harvest knife in his pocket. "The safety manual was also a lot smaller then," she said, with a relieved laugh.

The journey that started with the planting of that first seed has gone on now for 20 years. Cammy has accompanied youth and staff for 15 of those years, making important contributions every step of the way. For the second time now, her path will head in a different direction. She's getting ready again to leave the organization that has meant so much to her and a multitude of others. She left the first time in 1995, moving to New York along with her family. When she returned to TFP six years later, she came equipped with new skills and experiences gained through her work as a horticultural therapist with emotionally disturbed and learning-disabled children.

"I came back with a greater understanding of how to support young people who have trouble completing things, prioritizing, planning," she said. With youth who face a wide array of challenges, she learned to identify "the one thing they do really well." She worked to give them chances to excel in that one thing, as a basis for bringing them up in other areas where they struggled.

Recently, while cleaning out her house to prepare for her move, she found a videotape of one youth she'd worked with in this way. It was a speech the teen had given at a national conference. "Seeing it brought tears to my eyes because I knew what a struggle it was for her to get to a place where she could do something like that," she said. When asked to reflect on The Food Project's accomplishments and her hopes for the organization's future, Cammy names two intertwining directions – increased emphasis on food access and justice, and continued engagement with communities.

"From the beginning," she said, **"it was clear to us that the food system wasn't working and that people were unhealthy because they weren't eating well."** But it was difficult to get this message out because the larger world had yet to think or speak in terms of 'food systems' and the need to change them. "Now, the rest of the world has caught up," she said, "and I'd like to see us continue on this trajectory" of pushing for increased access to fresh food.

One of the most important ways of doing this is through deepening TFP's work with communities "in the ways we've been doing the last four to five years, strengthening relationships with other organizations, and learning how to get the most out of partnering."

True to her modest nature and generous spirit, Watts concluded: "I am incredibly grateful for having had the opportunity to make this my life's work and to learn from young people and all the amazing adults I've worked with." **Her journey with The Food Project has truly turned out to be the dream combination.**



Lincoln Orchardist Takes Pride in Supporting TFP



Lincoln resident Dr. Steve Kanner brings a touch of the poetic and large doses of practicality to just about everything he does. This pairing describes his relationship to The Food Project: for the past two years, he's been donating the entire output of his orchard to us. This also sheds light on the decision he and his wife Linda made 15 years ago to move Lincoln: they fell in love with beauty of the fruit trees surrounding their home.

"It was April and everything was in bloom," he said. "It just seemed magical." Along with the magic came the enormous amounts of work required to manage a three-acre orchard. He took on this challenge with no prior experience tending to fruit trees. He knew enough, however, to understand that come fall, he'd have apples everywhere. So he immediately set out to find help.

Initially he partnered with Charles Auger, owner of an orchard in Littleton. Auger sent crews of workers for two years, along with a tractor and sprayer loaded on a trailer. But the logistical obstacles proved too much to overcome. "So he said to me, 'I have an extra tractor and a sprayer you can use. Why don't I teach you how to do this?'" Kanner said.

Ever since, while keeping up his busy practice as an internist, he's put in the work to get to an "intermediate level" of know-how. Along the way, he's planted around 90 more trees, diversifying the orchard to include stone fruit and modern apple varieties. Today, the orchard numbers about 150 trees. Having learned the basics of pruning and spraying, and with continued support from Auger whenever available, Kanner effectively ran the orchard by himself for a number of years. Realizing that this effort may not be sustainable led him to get in touch with TFP.

"Gee, here we are in Lincoln, I drive by [The Food Project] that's about a mile down the road from us. Why don't we say hello?"

The result, Kanner said, has been "a win-win for both of us." Food Project staff and youth provide labor for the harvest and help with other maintenance tasks. Kanner is assured that the fruit of his labors does not fall to the ground, going to waste. This bounty of apples, pears, peaches, and apricots averages about 14,000 pounds per season.

An alumnus of Harvard College and Medical School, he was one of the first graduates of that institution who didn't pursue a specialized path in medical research. He instead chose clinical practice because he "likes people and likes doing things." This mindset is apparent when talks about what he appreciates most about his relationship to The Food Project:

"I remember this one Saturday in early fall, one of those brilliant, warm days we get that time of year. I'd been away in the morning for a meeting, and when I came back, I saw three Food Project trucks in the driveway. All around, there were 20 people, youth and adults picking peaches and apples. And I thought to myself, 'this is wonderful.' I get lots of satisfaction in seeing people, especially young people, who've never been to an orchard. For them to get to see an orchard and learn how fruit trees function – this is magical and I'd like to continue to support that."

Longtime Community Member Cherishes TFP

The glow in Winnie Pickett's eyes when she talks about The Food Project tells as much as the words she says. **Ever since her first visit to our Roxbury farmers' market seven years ago**, she has been an avid customer and strong supporter.

"I would tell my friends and even bring flyers to my church and encourage the congregation to support The Food Project," she said. "I've introduced new vegetables to some of my neighbors and showed them how to cook them. And they always say, 'Winnie, this is delicious!'"

A native of Guyana, Pickett knows the importance of eating good food and eating well. In fact, a desire to improve her health was what first brought her to our market. Recovering from brain surgery and a subsequent stroke, she knew that eating farm-fresh food would be a key to her long-term recovery. She's been doing fine ever since, and **Pickett's thrilled that locally grown food remains available in her community for her and others to enjoy.**

Pickett is a longtime resident of Dorchester, having moved to Boston in 1984 with her three sons. Her current residence on Rowell Street is a three-family that her eldest son bought. On making the purchase, one of his first steps was to invite his mother to move in to the first floor. "I'd raised them all as a single mother and that was his way of giving back," she said. "Back then, I was actually a tenant, but a tenant with very special benefits!"

The strength of her commitment to the community shows in many ways. An active member of St. Mary's Episcopal Church and serving as the parish's warden, Pickett also volunteers for the church's food pantry, as the community contact. She greets visitors, "you need to give them a warm welcome," and works to let people know about this important service provided by her church.

Given her ties to The Food Project and to St. Mary's, it was natural to bring the two together. Through Pickett's efforts, TFP has been donating excess food to the church's food pantry. Pickett recalled one breakfast when a load of Food Project cucumbers arrived "just in time to make the meal complete."

More recently, she's taken part in the Dudley greenhouse community advisory committee, offering TFP input on how to benefit local residents. (The Food Project began managing the greenhouse this year, in partnership with the Dudley Street Initiative and the Boston Public Health Commission.) Her great hope for the greenhouse is that it will provide more food for the community throughout the year.

"If this is a success, there will be hope for more. More greenhouses mean more people will get motivated," she said. "It's about all of us getting together to do the job."



The Food Project's mission is to create a thoughtful and productive community of youth and adults from diverse backgrounds who work together to build a sustainable food system. Our community produces healthy food for residents of the city and suburbs, provides youth leadership opportunities, and inspires and supports others to create change in their own communities.



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A Conversation with ACLs Canaris and Elizabeth

Ki Kim, TFP's new communications director, helps us get to know Canaris Simmons and Elizabeth Baxter. These two Boston natives work as assistant crew leaders for our academic year program (also known as the D.I.R.T. [dynamic, intelligent, responsible teenagers] Crew).

Where are you from? When did you start working at The Food Project? And of course, what's your favorite vegetable?

Canaris: I'm 18 and grew up mainly in Mattapan. I did SYP in 2007, just after middle school. I was 14 when I started. It comes down to broccoli and collard greens.

Elizabeth: I'm 19 and have lived in Dorchester and Milton. I started in 2009. This was the summer after my 10th grade. Squash – any kind – green squash, yellow squash, winter squash!

What made you decide that you wanted to continue working with TFP?

E: In the summer when I first did SYP, I didn't know I was going to like it as much as I did. And when it was over I knew I wanted to stay. It helped me grow so much, I felt like I wasn't done yet. I wanted to move up. The only way to move up was to do D.I.R.T., so I applied. And then when I was in D.I.R.T., I still didn't want to leave, I'm still in love with this place. So I applied to be an ACL because I wanted to see other [participants] grow.

C: When I first started, I didn't think I wanted to be involved with TFP any more because of the hard labor. I was 14 with the attention span of a cat.

E: Of a fish! [laughs]

C: -- yeah, of a fish. It was extremely hard for me to focus and concentrate in 95-degree weather and to continue to do that seemed tough. So I actually didn't do DIRT, and became an intern. I did a couple of internships for about a year and a half, and then took a year off from TFP to get another outlook on the job world. It was when I came back that I felt ready and excited to be around TFP, where I wanted to be an ACL.

What do you find rewarding about your partnership?

E: We like to say that we're the old married couple [laughs] ... of the DIRT crew because we're really good at having a friendship with each other. We're also good at being friends with the crew members and being able to teach them as well. They come to us as mentors, like an older sister or older brother.

C: We complement each other really well. We're definitely like an old married couple – I can't get through a Saturday without her. We work off each other's energy to guide the crew. We're able to continue learning ourselves as well as be an authority figure to crew members. We're a good pair.

Thinking back on all the roles you've played at TFP, have you had any surprising or unexpected experiences?

C: Being at TFP has opened up a lot of opportunities. I met lots of people from around the country, like the head chef of Bertucci's.

E: As an ACL, I've been surprised by how close I've gotten to the crew workers. You don't think they're going to attach to you like they do, and when they look up to you, it's like, wow ... and we're not that far apart in age, two or three years. One of them came up to me to tell me how much of an impact that I'd had, and that's a really touching thing. You don't know you affect someone like that until they come up and tell you.

What do you like most about working as ACLs?

E: Lakeisha (our supervisor) makes it special, a little more special than it already is. You can't really pick one specific thing that you like because I love everything about it. Well, the money's good [laughs]. Just being together as a community and a family, that's a good thing.

C: Especially being with Lakeisha and Elizabeth, that's one of my favorite things. Elizabeth always makes me laugh and so does Lakeisha, 'cause they're outrageous. Also, being with the D.I.R.T. crew, the experiences we have with them, just being together. You never know what to expect and you always get something new from each and every one of us. It's always fresh and it's never boring when we're together.

For the complete interview and more stories, visit: thefoodproject.org/blog



Lakeisha Gerald (left), alumna and program coordinator, sits down to meet and chat with ACLs Canaris Simmons and Elizabeth Baxter.

Fresh and Local: 20 Years and Counting

2011 is the 20th growing season for The Food Project and we'll be celebrating throughout the year. We'll be offering friends and supporters, longtime and new, many opportunities to join our celebration, including some exciting meals on the farms. Some of the finest local chefs will bring their artistry to our fields for celebrations of delicious food, fine company, and local flavor.

Be sure to get all the details by signing up to receive our enews: thefoodproject.org/newsletter

