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Local Food for Local Needs

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Furman alumni and students are joining the movement to promote the virtues of fresh food and healthy communities.

Local Food



DAN SEARS

for Local Needs

Visit a central North Carolina farmer's market any Saturday and the mounds of fresh, locally grown food belie the state's paradoxical nature. Farms statewide are among the most productive in the country, but North Carolinians are also among America's hungriest.

Although farmers produce plenty of food, no official system exists to get it to people who need it most. Often, farmers simply throw away the unsold fruits and vegetables that could nourish food-insecure families. It's a reality Margaret Tolbert Gifford '86 is working to change.

After talking with farmers and market organizers, Gifford (photo left) identified a consistent way she and the community could improve meals for many nearby families. In 2009, she launched Farmer Foodshare (FFS), a nonprofit organization in the state's Research Triangle (Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill area) that collects donations of fresh food and funds weekly. Its business model as a shoestring, volunteer-supported venture makes FFS a first-of-its-kind project.

"After hearing a homily one Sunday on local hunger, I realized if I wanted to make a difference, I just had to do it," says Gifford, who left a successful public relations career shortly before launching FFS. "It started when I asked Carrboro Farmer's Market leaders if they could deliver food I collected to Chapel Hill food pantries."

FFS blossomed after that. In the first six months, the organization collected 1,000 pounds of food at its Carrboro Farmer's Market donation station. Contributions sky-rocketed in 2010, totaling 40,000 pounds of fresh produce from five local farms.

Ken Dawson, co-owner of Maple Spring Gardens in Cedar Grove, has worked with FFS since the beginning. Donating his unsold produce is something he gladly does every week.

"It's good to have a mechanism to give produce to those in need," Dawson says. "That's the most satisfying part of the program. Each market, I can give a box of tomatoes or something similar. It occasionally puts a few

dollars in my pocket, but more importantly, it puts food in the hands of people who can use it."

Local residents who shop at the market are just as enthusiastic about helping their neighbors. According to Sarah Blacklin, manager of the Carrboro program, market attendees offer support not just by contributing money, but by purchasing food. Weekly donations total between 500 and 600 pounds.

"Not only are our farmers happy to do it, but our customers are excited about it and seek out the donation station," Blacklin says. "It's a very community-centered endeavor."

All donations stay within the community. The collected food bolsters 16 organizations serving those in need, including the Inter-Faith Council for Social Service (IFC). In fact, FFS donations helped the IFC provide nearly 900 meals during the 2010 holiday season.

"Our families appreciate the fresh produce," says Chris Moran, IFC executive director. "Fresh food is increasingly expensive, and they're delighted that the corn, cucumbers, tomatoes and sweet potatoes look like the ones at the grocery store."

The fruits and vegetables FFS delivers to IFC enhance the quality of food the agency offers, Moran says. They add a freshness to the recycled food from grocery stores or restaurants that constitutes the majority of donations.

But providing fresh food addresses only part of the problem, Gifford says. Combating hunger over the long term means families must learn to properly prepare and save healthy foods.

That's where the FFS program "Farm to Community Afterschool" comes in. Elementary school students receive \$10 to spend at the market, and FFS teaches them to prepare their purchases in a nutritious way. Recently, the children learned how to make and save pickles.

"It's a path to finding food independence," Gifford says. "Not only does it introduce low-income kids to new foods, but it destroys the misconception that kids don't like fresh food."

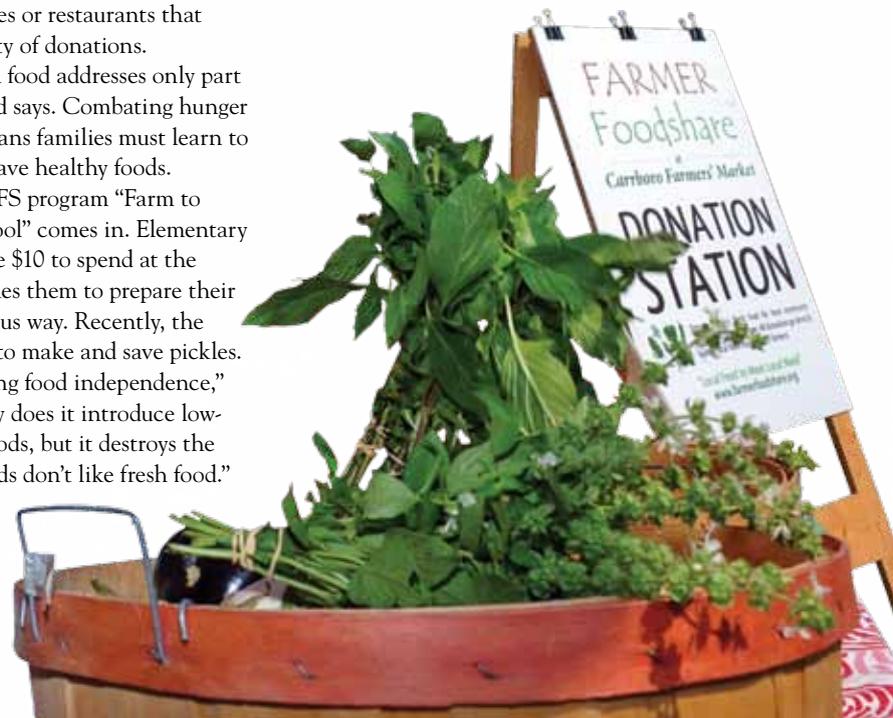
Walking through and talking with farmers makes the market a welcoming place for children of low-income families who can't typically afford fresh produce. It also gives farmers the opportunity to meet many of those who benefit from the fruits and vegetables they grow.

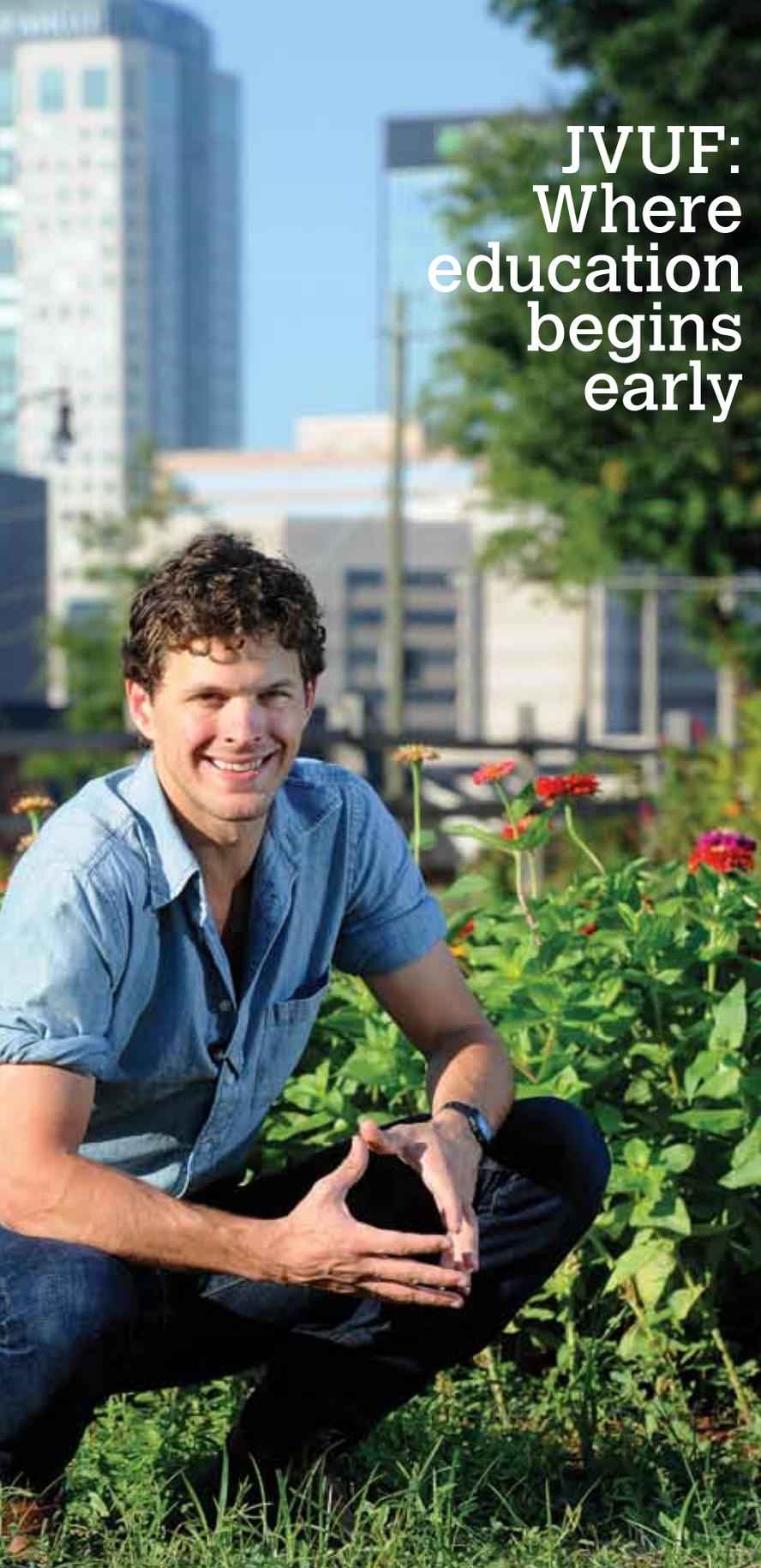
The impact of Farmer Foodshare doesn't stop there. The organization expanded its programs in August 2011 to help the backbone of its operations — the farmers. In recent years, Gifford says, local farmers lost up to \$17.5 million annually in unsold produce they either had to throw away or feed to livestock. The FFS program "Pennies on the Pound" gives farmers an additional method to earn income, as an e-commerce site connects local farms with nonprofit organizations that will buy excess produce at a discounted price.

"These farmers sweat every single head of lettuce, and most of them are living at the poverty line, too," Gifford says. "Pennies on the Pound is a way for agencies that help communities in need get food at an affordable price, while putting money back in the farmers' pockets."

— WHITNEY JACKSON HOWELL

Visit www.farmerfoodshare.org to learn more.





JVUF: Where education begins early

IN THE MIDDLE OF DOWNTOWN BIRMINGHAM, ALA., next to Interstates 20 and 59 and a few apartment complexes, sits something that seems a bit out of place: a 3.5-acre farm dedicated to growing organic produce and flowers.

Jones Valley Urban Farm (JVUF), a nonprofit organization that began in 2001, grew out of a vacant city block. Today, it boasts three farms and sells to two farmer's markets.

Birmingham native Grant Brigham '07 took the helm as executive director in early 2011, and under his leadership JVUF has expanded its efforts not only to teach local children about healthy foods, but to increase their access to fresh produce.

"With the statistics on childhood obesity, we wanted to add to what kids learn about nutrition," says Brigham (photo left). "Our view is that food education should be integrated into the school curriculum. My hope is that the school administrators will see the value of what we offer and budget for it."

JVUF offers two programs that put fresh food on kids' plates. "Seed 2 Plate" brings elementary and middle school students to the farm to tour the facilities, harvest vegetables and watch a kitchen demonstration. They end the day by using the farm vegetables to create a healthy snack. By the end of 2011, more than 5,000 children from 75 schools were scheduled to participate in the program.

"Farm to School" brings JVUF-grown food, such as eggplant, peppers, tomatoes and salad greens, into local school cafeterias, then goes a step further by offering culinary training for cafeteria personnel. The lessons include nutritional education, as well as tips that make it easier to incorporate the vegetables into school lunches.

"There's a very clear direction outlined for JVUF," Brigham says. "We want to improve the health and health awareness of students at the city and state level, particularly those in urban locations."

Brigham is no stranger to the importance of access to fresh food. After graduating from Furman, he joined a start-up nonprofit dedicated to making a social impact in Uganda. As part of his work, he helped agro-business groups build plans to attract U.S. capital investment.

Money to bolster Ugandan agriculture is an urgent need, he says. "We found roughly 80 percent of Ugandans are directly tied in some way to a farm for employment," Brigham says. "Coming from an affluent area and having never worried about food, I found it enlightening to watch small organizations and farms become self-sufficient. It gave me a well-rounded perspective on the social importance of having nutritious food."

When the chance came to leave Uganda and transfer his experience elsewhere, he chose to return home. It was an opportunity, Brigham says, to improve the health of the children in a city where 43 square miles of neighborhoods have been described as "food deserts."

"The heart of why I do this, and why JVUF exists, is educating young people about health and nutrition," he says. "We want to reconnect them with the idea that fresh foods lead to better health."

— WHITNEY JACKSON HOWELL

Visit www.jvuf.org to learn more. The author, a 2000 graduate, is a freelance writer in Durham, N.C.



Fraternity brothers Will George (left) and Nick Millette amid the fruits of their labors.

MAX DUTCHER

Slow food, KA style

THANKS IN LARGE PART to one brother's love of good food and background as a chef — and his May Experience trip to Italy — Furman's KA fraternity has joined the slow food movement.

Will George '12 was part of a Furman group that traveled abroad in May 2010 to study "Slow Food, Italian Style." Slow food is an international effort that links "the pleasure of good food with a commitment to the community and the environment" and encourages people to take a sustainable approach to the things they eat, according to www.slowfood.com.

Led by professor William Allen, the students spent two weeks living on a farm near Sora, Italy, experiencing traditional farming and food preparation firsthand. George, who's been a cook in a restaurant in his hometown of New Orleans, says he was already aware of the value of "local food" and high quality, fresh ingredients. But the trip reinforced his belief in "the pleasure of growing and enjoying food on site."

Last spring and summer at the fraternity's house on eight woody acres in Travelers Rest, George, Max Dutcher '12 and several other KA brothers began cultivating an organic garden. They used no chemical fertilizers or pesticides and planted primarily heirloom varieties of fruits and vegetables, including okra, peas, tomatoes, canteloupe, squash, collards, arugula, and assorted herbs. It wasn't long before their table overflowed with bounty.

As summer transitioned into fall, so did the garden.

The brothers added a second plot and filled it with such crops as cabbage, bell peppers, lettuce and broccoli. Given the abundant results, they began to investigate donating their extras to local food pantries and other community organizations. They also added turkeys and chickens, with goats a possibility if they can figure out how to keep the coyotes at bay.

George, a political science and history major, says the garden offers much more than gastronomical benefits: "It promotes a greater sense of community among our fraternity. We all have a role in planting, maintaining and harvesting. Meals have become more of a slow, communal affair. We enjoy both our food and each other's company."

And you can't beat dining on veggies at the peak of their freshness. George makes special mention of his vine-to-table record for preparing a meal: "Six minutes," he says. "Grilled bell peppers."

So now Furman students have more choices. They can sample produce grown at Furman's own organic farm, located beside the David E. Shi Center for Sustainability, or dial up the KA house and ask, "Hey guys, what's for dinner?"

But who'll pick up the pitchfork after George, Dutcher and other leaders of the movement graduate in May? Chances are someone will emerge from the group that heads back to Italy this spring for another May Experience in sustainable food practices.

— JIM STEWART