JVUF: Where education begins early

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IN THE MIDDLE OF DOWNTOWN BIRMINGHAM, ALA., next to Interstate 20 and I-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 grows 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.

“Farm to School” is an important aspect of the local food movement.

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

When the chance came to leave Uganda and transfer his capital investment. “We found roughly 80 percent of Ugandans are directly tied in some way to growing food. It wasn’t long before their table overflowed with such crops as cabbage, bell peppers, lettuce and broccoli. Given the abundant results, they began to investigate donating their extra 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.

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

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Slow food, KA style

THANKS IN LARGE part to the brotherhood’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 Soris, Italy, experimenting with traditional farming and food preparation firsthand. George, who’s a political science and history major, says the experience “will see the value of what we offer and budget for it.”

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