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JVUF: Where education begins early

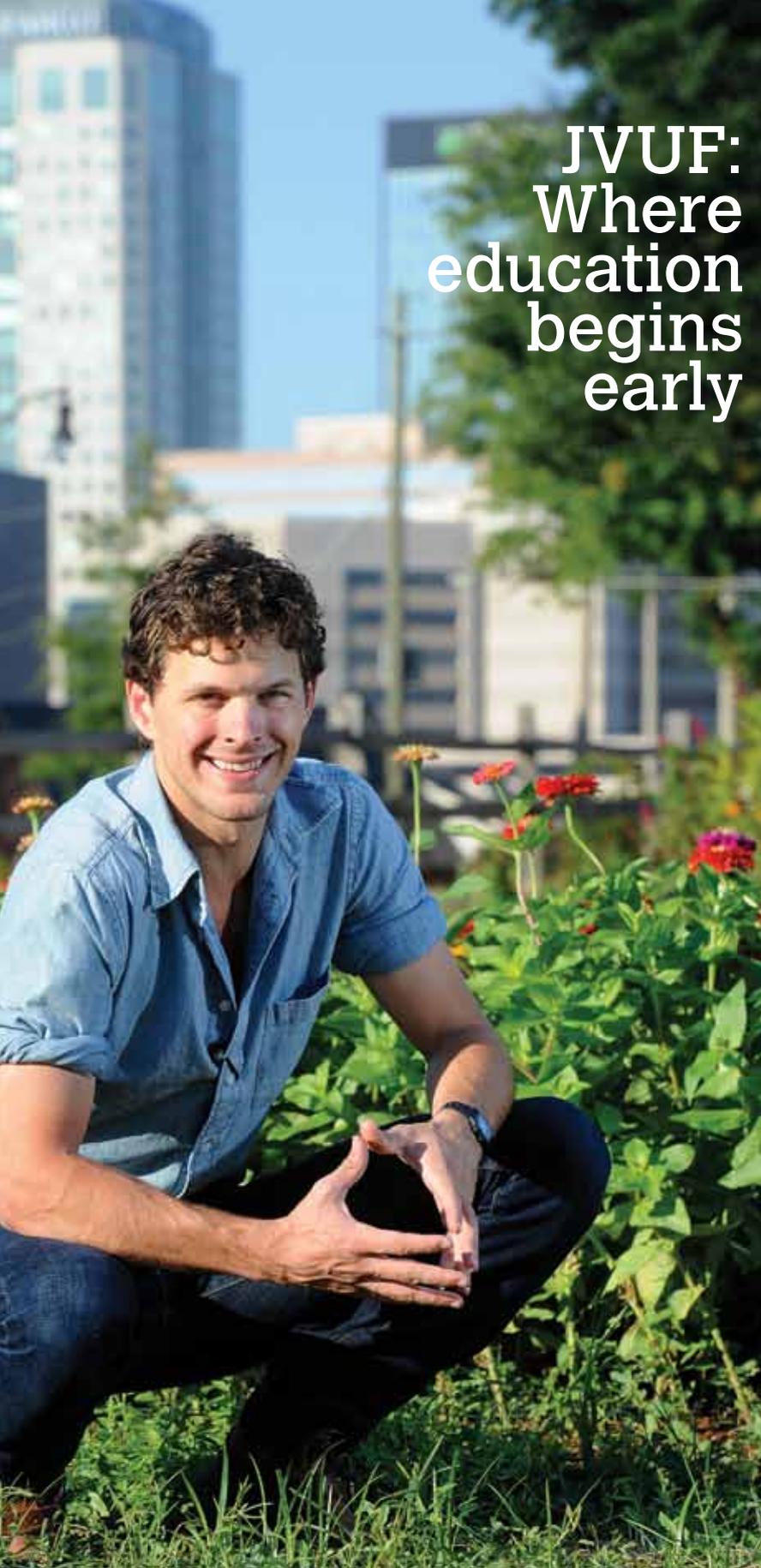
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JVUF: Where education begins early

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.