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Slow food, KA style

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IN THE MIDDLE OF DOWNTOWN BIRMINGHAM, ALA., next to Interstate 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 gives 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 well-being 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 startup 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 agriculture,” Brigham says. “For them, 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.

In the fall of 2010, Brigham returned to the city and state level, particularly those in urban locations.”

When the chance came to leave Uganda and transfer his 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, experimenting traditional farming and food preparation firsthand. George, who’s primary heirloom varieties of fruits and vegetables, including okra, peas, tomatoes, cantaloupe, 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.

THANXS 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.

“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 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 2007 graduate, is a freelance writer in Durham, N.C.

Slow food, KA style

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 planning, 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.”

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

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