

"Farm Together Now: A portrait of people, places and ideas for a new food movement" was a book published by Chronicle Books in late 2010 featuring interviews and photo essays about 20 farms across the United States. The book was a collaboration between Amy Franceschini & Daniel Tucker, with a foreword by Mark Bittman, Photography by Anne Hamersky & Illustrations by Corinne Matesich, Design by Brian Scott. see farmtogethernow.org

Chapter 6

Angelic Organics Learning Center

Caledonia, Chicago, and Rockford, Illinois

Scale: 220 acres of farmland, forest, oak savannah, prairie strips, orchards, and flowing creeks in

Caledonia, plus additional, rotating acreage in urban areas of Chicago and Rockford

Operating body: 12 staff

Type: nonprofit wing of a for-profit farm

Currently producing: new farmers and gardeners

In operation: since 1998

Website: www.learnrowconnect.org

The Angelic Organics Learning Center (AOLC) is the nonprofit education and outreach partner of Angelic Organics Farm, one of the largest community supported agriculture (CSA) farms in the country. Mostly city folk from Chicago buy “shares” in the farm and get a box of farm-fresh food once a week. So the fruits of the farm itself can be seen on dinner tables and in lunch pails throughout the far-reaching sprawl that is Chicago and its suburbs.

The Learning Center itself, an outgrowth of the biodynamic farm and CSA, has three main

locations and thematic focus areas: the Urban Initiative, which offers support and leadership development to residents of Chicago and Rockford who are trying to create and improve their local food systems; the Farmer Training Initiative, which offers training to new farmers from Angelic Organics Farm in Caledonia, Illinois (roughly an hour and forty-five minutes from Chicago); and the On-Farm Initiative, which offers education programs ranging from school visits on the farm to food production (organic gardening, wine, cheese, etc.) workshops.

The Angelic Organics Learning Center covers a large territory—urban, suburban, and rural. How did that happen?

Tom Spaulding (TS), executive director: When the rural northern Illinois farm we are on went under as a conventional farm in the 1980s, it was reborn as Angelic Organics Farm [for more history, see the film *The Real Dirt on Farmer John*], an organic, biodynamic, CSA farm in Caledonia. We had a strong connection to the urban people who supported this, so when the Learning Center was born in 1999, just six years after the CSA started, our natural region enlarged to include Chicago, the rural ring around it, and up into southern Wisconsin. This is because the food system that serves Chicago does not respect county or state lines.

Thus the farm and the Learning Center have relationships with people through our economic, social, and cultural involvements, and these entail linking up with people of all economic levels and cultural backgrounds. We've taken on the shapes, colors, and ideas of people from very diverse backgrounds. There is a diversity of classes, genders, and age, and we are better off for it.

Thea Maria Carlson (TC), Urban Initiative program coordinator: In almost every neighborhood in Chicago, there is a pretty big mix of different kinds of people. It's challenging and fun to figure out how to get everyone on the same page about food. But what I love about food is that everyone has to eat!

What do you see as some of the advantages of working through legislature and government?

TS: Farms at this moment—if they are biodynamic or have other natural approaches—are part of the cultural, social, and economic renewal that we need. The advocacy and policy work we do emerges organically from the people we're working with, from what they're involved in and are facing in their lives. For instance, we started working with people who want to raise chickens in the city, when all of a sudden the city said that chickens should be banned because they're a health hazard. It was almost imperative that we got involved. We are not a big policy organization, but we share a responsibility to help tell the story, and sometimes that means sharing it in a policy arena or with government bodies.

When we think of a healthy local food system, we look at ecological sustainability: Is the land you are farming going to be healthy in twenty years or not? Are the rivers running cleaner than they were twenty years ago or not? Are people able to sustain themselves or their livelihoods better or not? These criteria must come into the conversation.

How does the Urban Initiative approach residents?

TC: There is a tendency to be imperialist when it comes to showing others how to do sustainable agriculture. We try to avoid that. Most of the people in the communities where we're working have been there much longer than us—we let them be in control of what happens there.

Martha Boyd (MB), Urban Initiative program director: Every one of the Learning Center's initiatives is about building self-reliance, learning what people *can* do.

Talk about one of your success stories.

TC: We worked with both the Marjorie Kovler Center, a treatment place for survivors of torture, and the Chicago Waldorf School on a shared garden that was on land temporarily borrowed from Loyola University. Even though those two groups were the ones managing the garden, other people in the neighborhood helped or dropped off food scraps for compost. Then Loyola said [it needed the land back]—the plan all along. The [people at the center and the school] felt paralyzed about losing the garden. We began to [strategize] how to reach out to all the wonderful people in the community and tell the story about how the garden positively affected folks.

At some point, a rumor developed that Loyola wasn't going to build on that land after all. All of a sudden people were saying, "Save the Sofia Garden!" And so we had this big community meeting of fifty people upset about how nothing was being done to save the garden. We explained about all of the work that had been done, about how we were documenting everything, and our plan for bringing more people in. Out of that meeting, people decided that the new space

should be more of a community garden open to individual plot holders. We met with everyone, from the park advisory council to people down the street. In the end, thirty-two families were able to have plots in the new garden, in addition to plots for community organizations.

TS: One of the best memories I have from the early years of starting the Learning Center on the farm was having the refugees from the Kovler Center out on the farm. The bridging of worlds—rural and urban, different nationalities, farmers and nonfarmers, et cetera—and finding commonality, finding things to work on together, creates some interesting space for some miraculous healing to occur. Not just for them, but for us.

Who are the people coming through your farmer training courses?

Sheri Doyel (SD), Farmer Training Initiative program director: Surprisingly, many people aren't from a farming background. More than 50 percent of our students are city or suburban people. Some have financial stability and want to change their lifestyle, live rurally. Some are looking to live closer to the land, grow their own food, and provide food for other people. Most are college educated and are interested in systems—for example, the system of the farm, or the system of sales. They tend to be people who are not small thinkers; they tend to have a really good handle on the bigger picture. We are mainly training people to become entrepreneurs. And that takes risk, so it requires a certain maturity. Their learning curve and their willingness to dive into something that is different are astounding on so many levels. There is a lot of idealism in the room.

What are some of the obstacles that stand in the way of starting a small sustainable farm?

SD: We identify four obstacles. The first one is huge: *land access*. Not necessarily ownership of but access to a city lot or a piece of land. The second is *financing*. We have a few students with resources, but most come without land or a big bank account. They have to be creative about financing and educated about getting loans. Next is *market development*. Most people know about farmers markets, CSAs, or selling to restaurants—but not a lot of people know how to diversify so that they have financial stability or how to expand and shift to wholesale. And the last obstacle is lack of access to *training and education*. We offer farm business planning, and we partner with Michael Fields Agricultural Institute for their production workshops. Our CRAFT network provides mentorship and training in an informal way.

We are almost finished with a handbook on how to replicate our advanced farmer training components and CRAFT. It's a big part of our mission to help people replicate what we do.

Farmers teach most of your workshops. What do you say when people ask about training the competition?

SD: First, I say that we don't need to worry about that because the demand for locally produced food is so high. But at AOLC it is not uncommon for the first response to that question to be about demand and the second response to be something about the benefits of generosity. There is almost something karmically motivating about helping people learn how to farm.

When we talk about how to define success we ask our students: Is it because 80 percent of your household income comes from the farm? Because the farm pays for itself? Is it because you have a sense of contentedness at the end of the day? How do you prioritize those things? We help people have a viable farm business in which they are farming sustainably.

Where would you like to see the Learning Center in five years?

SD: If more people take Farm Dreams, our half-day workshop that is helping participants understand if they really want to get start farming. Tom says if 90% of people who participate in Farm Dreams decide they are not going to farm then it's been a success. Because this is not whimsical. Its a serious venture that could eat up all your resources if you don't do it properly or have the support. It would be great if we could have more people explore what it takes to farm and have that permeate them and influence their buying habits and how they garden, how they visit markets or talk to their friends about food production. If the consumer base shifts, a huge amount of change is going to take place—and this would produce more sustainable farmers.

TS: During the next five years and into the next thirty we see continuing to ramp up the farmer training—passing on the skills and techniques of the current generation of biodynamic and organic growers in our region to the next generation who want to initiate farming. And we see the expansion in the urban areas, working with more youth and more adults, broadening the work we are doing with those communities.

We are grounded in a biodynamic farm, and we see the farm as a living organism moving by 2030 into having a greater balance and more livestock to equate the vegetable production. In the next twenty years I think you'll see us work together with Angelic Organics Farm to bring a dairy back and to reintroduce grains. And if there is grain production, then a bakery could be developed as well as additional value-added production to compliment the vegetable production. And with the On-Farm Initiatives, within the next five years we will build an overnight

residential facility. This would be a place where groups from the city can come and stay for a week or longer—an ecological and beautiful space where they can be together in a temporary community while encountering the farm in its fullness. We are hoping that will be ready by 2013.