

Meet Me on the Farm: Spring 2013 on Chicago Lights Urban Farm

Skot Rogers | Spring 2013

"I'm on the farm Wednesday." This was the phrase I must've said ten times during the Spring semester of 2013. I said it to friends, family, dates, and bosses. Because my Wednesday class wasn't at the same location as all of my others, logistics were a consideration all Spring when planning to meet up, go out, cook, help someone with errands, etc. Looking back though, and certainly looking deeper inside, I realize that I probably didn't only mention that I'd be coming from an urban farm for the sake of making adequate plans; I probably mentioned it a lot because I thought it was *actually a really cool thing to be doing*. While I knew I would find a course on sustainable farming interesting, I was surprised by not only how interesting it was, but also by how much I actually enjoyed the work and the kids I worked with.

I wondered when considering whether or not to take this course if it would be grueling, back-breaking, intense labor. After an injury in Fall 2012, I ended up getting some hardware installed in my wrist: a plate and seven screws. Going in, the concern was whether or not this would be something that would keep me from being able to do the things I would need to do on the farm without hurting myself. My totally unsubstantiated fear in the last six months is that someday, somewhere, I'll be doing some random thing and all of a sudden a screw will pop out of my hand like an alien in a sci-fi movie. With reassurance that it would not be like that at all, I signed up. Thankfully it wasn't long before I found plenty of low-impact things to do. My height usually brings about a lot of, "Hey, you're tall. Could you come reach this?" That's often followed by, "No not that. Nope. To the left. Yep. Grab two

$\frac{1}{\sqrt{\pi}} \int_{-\infty}^{\infty} f(x) \delta(x-a) dx = f(a)$

tall parts of the signs, hung the lights from the tall ceiling of the greenhouse. I also did other stuff like organizing the outside of the shed, helping turn soil over, helping clean up and water the plants, fix doors on the hoop-houses. And while it was freezing at points, while it was not as cozy as sitting in a perfectly heated office tower, it was amazing how nice it was to actually move things around, including myself, not just numbers on spreadsheets.

I was definitely surprised at the uncanny connection I would feel to the required reading for this course. My story of leaving full time corporate business work, following my passion back to school, and thus here to the farm, was such a mirror version of Will Allen's story of leaving corporate America and going out into urban agriculture. In the first chapter of The Good Food Revolution, he talks about moving up in a giant corporation while at the same time not having a deep sense of connection to the actual product he makes. When I read his statement, "I had stuffed myself into the shape of this job..." (Allen, 2012, p. 12) it was almost as if the sentence flashed on the page in neon before I even put my highlighter on it. Because when I think about the contrast of my two extremes, the work I did Mondays/Fridays in the corporate world, vs. the work I did on the farm on Wednesdays, I could really see the way my own shape changed in such a polarized way throughout each week. I could see the way my corporate duties confine me and stuff me, just like Will Allen, into an ever-restricting mold, where the edges of the things I'm truly passionate about are dulled and bent to fit into the day-to-day concerns of my corporate job. In my position—renewables, sustainability, and environmental concerns are about as relevant as my spreadsheets, requirements, and test plans would be to a worm in the compost bin on the farm. Alternately, out on Chicago Lights and Iron Street both, my shape was the opposite. I felt tiny, and unconstrained like a bug being blown off of a piece of wood chip. I felt like there is as much to learn about all of this, as there is open sky above me.

Thinking about what really changed within me before and after the farm, it definitely has to do with the way I've reconsidered today's young people, namely the kids volunteering at Chicago Lights. Looking back at myself at their age—in my own middle school to high school years, I'd probably call myself the most inwardly-outward person I could think of. My hair was dyed a different color of the rainbow every week and my clothes were anything from bright neon Hawaiian shirts to women's gold lame lamé tops. Anything that was bright, unusual, attention-grabbing, was snatched off of the thrift store racks and on me the next day. I would come to school with “#@!?” or other gawlix drawn on my forehead or painted on my fingernails. I would pay some attention in my classes but was overall more interested, probably closer to consumed, with making sure that any opinion formed about me, anything said about me, any joke laughed about me, was made not by others, but *by me*. This razor-sharp focus on myself probably came from a lot of teasing in elementary school. Being a freakishly tall, quite effeminate, gangly kid trying anything possible to disappear into the crowd certainly never worked; I was laughed at, made fun of, and didn't really fit in with anyone. So starting in middle school, lasting most of high school, I would go the opposite way and own the strangeness, explode the strangeness I suppose, and it worked for that purpose. Fast-forward to the Youth Corps coming to the farm, I literally had a mild anxiety attack the first day we were planning to meet them. Here I was, a 31 year old man, successfully grown into his own skin, borderline terrified of these kids. I pictured them, raw in their thoughts and emotions not only in youth, but also in what I imagined differences in their background might be, capable of blurting out potentially anything. I was panicked thinking about what if one of them would say something to me or put me on the spot in such a way that I would be reconnected to that wanting-to-be-anything-but-noticed kid I was before middle school. I took a deep breath and thought, “they're just kids” and went to class. What I found, very surprisingly, is that they were not just kids; they were great kids.

people as I was to be around younger people, and as soon as the nerves were gone it hit me: these kids are here on their own free time volunteering. I thought back to myself and saw the real contrast. There was absolutely no way I would be remotely involved in anything like this because of how ferociously preoccupied with myself I was at their age. I saw them understanding, years earlier than it would eventually take me to realize, how to detach one's self from the constant grip of that inwardness, and get involved with something bigger—something productive. Seeing them put their service first, their ego and fear of their own vulnerability second, was truly inspiring. Talking with them through the weeks, listening to them talk to each other out there in the soil, it all made me even more passionate about doing whatever I can in my work to help people like these kids get a fair shot at making a reality out of all of their dreams, making a fair and socially conscious world for them to thrive in, helping to build a clean and sustainable environment for them to live in—I will always remember them.

In the excerpt from David Whitaker's, Cabrini-Green in Words and Pictures, former-resident Gerald Washington says, "I've been tellin' people Cabrini's gonna be a memory in the next 20 years, so you better hold on to a lot of this stuff..." He talks about how little involvement there is by the current residents of Cabrini stating, "Another sad thing about this redevelopment is that people in this community don't even know what's going on, and there's maybe about 30% that really care...I went to a town hall meeting discussing this neighborhood and I'd say about 85% of the people at this meeting were not living in the area. That was crazy to me" (Whitaker, 2000, p. 204). I hope that the kids I met volunteering their time in this community represent a new norm for Cabrini and communities like it. I hope that kids like these, courses like this, and farms like Chicago Lights continue to inspire the world, showing how assistance can create profound empowerment. I hope where service and sustainability meet, lives like those of the Youth Corp and mine alike will continue to change for the better.

Works Cited

Allen, W. (2012). *The Good Food Revolution; Growing Healthy Food, People, and Communities*. New York, NY: Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

Whitaker, D. T. (2000). *Cabrini-Green in Words and Pictures*. LongRiver Books Inc.