

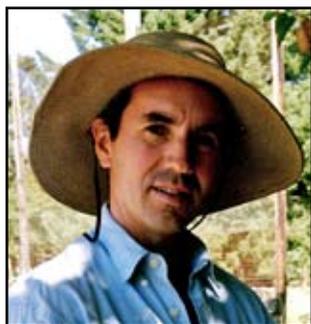


Photo - Ron Greystar

(From left) Enjoying Brookside Farm produce are Sky Greystar, Curtis Bradford, Davis Bradford, River Greystar, and Reed Greystar.

BROOKSIDE FARM

Making the connection between education, schools, children, food and farming.



BY: JASON BRADFORD

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I am the parent of two boys who attended Brookside Elementary School in the town of Willits, California. On the first day of school in August 2005, I wandered to the back of the schoolyard and noticed a one acre grassy field essentially unused behind preschool buildings on the grammar school campus. From my knowledge of soils in the area, I knew I was standing on a balanced loam, and within minutes decided it was an ideal site for a school farm specializing in vegetables and fruits.

A nonprofit administering the adjacent Head Start preschool ►



Brookside Farm adjacent to preschool buildings, which are part of a larger complex that includes Brookside Elementary School.

Photo - Ron Greystar

agreed to be the farm's fiscal agent, and a local master gardener agreed to help me make sound decisions. I wrote a proposal to the school board for establishing Brookside Farm. The project was approved January 2006. The land was essentially free, but I had nothing else other than some ideas, a lot of friends and interest in learning how to become a farmer. Not wanting to go into debt or exhaust my own money, I started raising funds within the community. Local businesses helped with supplies. Local service clubs and individuals gave money. By December 2006, we had a sturdy fence and cover crops sown. An orchard, berries and table grapes were planted that winter. Following a CSA model, in early 2007 and 2008, we sold farm shares as our primary income. This year, two of the twelve shares were bought by the preschool, with the rest going to private households.

I have many reasons for wanting to farm, but for the school system I focused on the need to improve student health and education.

From my proposal to the district: Educators are increasingly aware of how nutrition and physical activity influence the learning process. Students fed a balanced diet of high-quality foods are more likely to be able to pay attention, cause fewer disruptions to others and be ready to learn. Opportunities to develop sturdy bones, strong muscles, efficient hearts, balance, and coordination also positively impact academic achievement. The common-sense wisdom comes down to this: A healthy body is better able to support the development of a good mind.

School board members worried that I would burn out and leave a mess on their property. Until food is more highly valued, the risk of farm failure is real. I argued this project would garner widespread community support and provide a tangible economic return in the form of food. I believe a role exists for public institutions to add economic stability to local farms by seeing that they are valued not only for the food they produce, but for a variety of cultural, educational and environmental benefits.

The existence of a working farm gives school kitchens an incentive to incorporate fresher, healthier produce. My long-term

goal is for the farm to be fully supported by the schools, but the process of incorporating more fresh produce into institutional kitchens takes time. I regularly provided vegetables to the kitchens and asked what was most easily used. By now, the kitchen staff wanted to serve Brookside Farm produce, but their ability to do so varied. The smaller preschool kitchens had no trouble including fresh veggies. The elementary school cafeteria feels understaffed and prefers items requiring little preparation time, such as cherry tomatoes, while the preschool will use anything grown.

Students really enjoy visiting the farm. To improve their experience, I'm working with the school's garden educator and a high school art class to produce a trail system with signs along the route. Signs connect the activities and parts of the farm to basic curricula standards, e.g., concepts of numbers and distance by trail lengths; cardinal directions relative to the position of the sun; basic plant morphology and seasonal life cycle diagramed, etc.

A local foundation is funding a "Kid's Garden" at the farm to be managed by a garden educator. Beds and tools will be tailored to their body size, and creative use of plantings will tie into specific learning goals. Here's how I explained the value to the district:

Directly related to education is the fact that children are very tactile beings who learn faster and retain knowledge better when they are physically and emotionally engaged in the subject ... a school farm provides a dynamic, living laboratory of objects and processes that lend purpose to the abstractions of the classroom.

As a biologist, I am drawn towards working with soil, plants and associated critters. I became personally interested in farming through my understanding of the converging crises of resource depletion, pollution and economic instability. Brookside Farm is also a demonstration project for methods of food production, preservation and distribution that don't rely on fossil fuels, don't pollute and don't damage soil health. This mission attracted the partnership of the Post Carbon Institute, which supported the farm's development by hiring my coworker for nearly two years, Chris Hansen.

It is not a lonely farm, disconnected from the people it serves by distance and commodity markets, but a social hub. Stu- ▶

dents, parents, teachers, CSA members, worker volunteers, college classes, neighbors, and food activists visit regularly. Harvest day is Tuesday, and in the afternoon, farm members arrive for their produce baskets. At the same time, Brookside Farm serves as a distribution point for other CSAs selling meat, eggs, milk, cheese, grains, herbs, and olive oil from other farms in the county. Tuesday evening is a regular potluck at the farm. Wednesday mornings will often find my friend Sara slicing produce to fill the solar food dryers. I can expect Austin, a 17-year old independent study student, to show up once or twice a week in the mornings.

Because it serves so many functions and is relatively new, Brookside Farm keeps growing. This year, we installed an irrigation system. I placed four bee hives on site. Our perennial plants, such as culinary and medicinal herbs, are growing. A photo voltaic electric system is being erected. We now have two vermiculture bins for composting food scraps from downtown organic restaurants. Not having grown up on a farm, all these projects teach me new hands-on skills. I'm looking to construct an equipment shed and greenhouse as time and resources allow.

The substitution of fossil fuels for labor in farming has created an abundance of cheap food and a dearth of farmers. Part of my struggle at Brookside Farm is employing more labor intensive, but ultimately more sustainable, practices while keeping the cost in line with price expectations. So far, this has meant CSA shares are priced at less than the cost of production. The difference is made up by grants, donations, and volunteer labor. With the new photo voltaic system, I will use more time-saving tools that run on renewably generated electricity, but many of these are capital intensive.

As a new farmer, of course I have learned a great deal about the predilections of various crops and their pests. But what interests me more to consider is how my character has changed. As a farmer, I am viscerally aware of my dependence upon forces beyond my control and at great scale. I now face the world with greater humility. When I plant a seed or a tree, I know that it will take time to bear fruit and this imbues me with greater patience. My body is required to get up and work day after day, and because I have a responsibility towards the farm, I must maintain my health. Therefore, I have learned to work at a pace that is steady and earnest, not quick and exhausting. And although each winter, I make plans about how the season will unfold and what my schedule will be, no year is average and I have learned to deviate from my path when appropriate, knowing that survival requires adaptation to reality. These lessons are as good as anything I learned while still in school. ■



Photo - Ron Greystar

◀ Farm assistant Chris Hansen picks peas with children getting first-hand exposure to food at Brookside Farm.



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