

school gardens, weeding on a sunny afternoon. You just prune and weed and transplant... I enjoy teaching and sharing. And daily I walk up the hill to Buena Vista Park."

Then Heather remembered another story from the recent camping trip with her dad, and her brother, Anton: "We had a kayak, and one day Anton and I took it out in the bay to see some cave paintings. Suddenly I hear this 'Ploof' and Anton looked around and hollered, 'Sharks!' We screamed, but I called, 'No, they can't be sharks, sharks don't have blow holes!' Immediately we were surrounded by about a hundred dolphins, frolicking and showing off for us. We screeched and screamed—no one else around—but the dolphins seemed to like it." ❖

Nature's beauty, whether it's the urban garden, the wide-open prairie, the Northern Lights or the frolicking dolphin, is one of our planet's greatest gifts. To me, the remembered beauty of well-known places is like a fold in the fabric of our lives. Seeing the same places in their seasonal beauties brings it all back together again—shakes out the wrinkles and knots of the fabric of our busy-ness and smooths it, puts life back in order. I can go on then, creating more wrinkles.

# A Next Generation's Challenges

The ideals of sustainable agriculture, imagined in the late 1970s, must now brave their way into the twenty-first century. It is this generation that will do it. It is this generation that *is* doing it, step by step, on the land or in the policy-making halls. Part of the power of these interviews was the close-up look at how this generational transfer is being done. My question was about challenges.

## "Organic vegetables are a lot of work!"

Direct marketing is one element in this century's actions toward a sustainable food system. One major challenge in establishing direct market or community supported agriculture enterprises is the issue of *labor*. Creative diversity on soil is labor-intensive; when you let the land speak, someone must listen closely. Easy Bean Farm near Milan, Minnesota, offers residencies for interns, but finding steady labor to handpick fields of vegetables or weed watermelon patches is still an issue. Mike Jacobs talks about this: "There's a great community of people out here—small but deep—based more on necessity than fun (that's a good thing). And it's multi-generational, which is also good. If we separate the ages, every generation has to re-invent the wheel," Mike remarks. "Yet," adds Malena, "I hope we don't burn out on the work and life of Easy Bean—

Deborah Lentz  
with Ariana at  
organic  
farmers'  
market



that we're able to keep evolving and figure out our personal needs."

In August of 2003, Easy Bean Farm was looking at its fifth season with the CSA and its seventh season growing vegetables. In 2003, there were 128 families in the CSA—about 350 people, so " . . . there's a lot of traffic coming through Easy Bean." ❖

On their 40 organic acres called Tantre Farm, Deb Lentz and her husband, Richard, started a CSA in year 2000. It allows them more diversity in crops and they've added the practice of selling to restaurants and various local stores. The first year with the CSA they had 40 members, three years later 130 members. When their daughter, Ariana, was born, Deb quit teaching to do the marketing and business management. Now she names the time-pressures of this work and the issue of labor. **"It is a lot of personal work and really limits one's personal time."** Deb wonders if Ariana benefits or loses in this scenario? Children come to the farm and Deb meets with young moms. This activity would not have happened

without the CSA, **"Yet our time is really trapped. Farming can be a burnout career from 6:00 AM to 9:00 PM. Just to be gone for five days in the summer is really hard—a summer family vacation together is impossible from June 1st to October 31st . . . "The pressure to do conventional farming is just so real. Organic vegetables are a lot of work!"**

Deb continues, **"It's hard to hire reliable help. Workers come and go and the labor force is inconsistent. They do work long hours, and we provide a big lunch, so once they're here, it's fine. Our workers are good people, but they lead such busy lives—there are always weddings or conferences or travel schedules to work around."**

Yet she and Richard are still happy with their choice of community supported agriculture. **"We have much more support because of the CSA. We have the support of nearby farmers who started at a similar time. There is a community of them—in their late 20s, early 30s—especially three specific people nearly daily. One farmer is a lettuce man, and we barter lettuce for squash and potatoes. He started a CSA last year, and this allows us to share produce to fill more of the needs of our members."** There are two farmers' markets as well. Deb met a young farmer and encouraged him, teaching him that the initial dollar support from the CSA allows you to actually do what you want. **"It's a sure thing."** ❖

Starting as a U-pick operation, the Fisher-Merritts of Wrenshall, Minnesota, now run a CSA their own way on 200 acres. They raise summer vegetables such as beans, broccoli, potatoes, tomatoes, peppers . . . and they recently added a root cellar. Financed by CSA members who loaned money for the root cellar (many at zero

percent interest across seven years), the cellar is a cool, vented underground storage system where foods are layered with peat moss, plastic, and burlap. It allows for monthly winter shares of carrots, potatoes, beets, rutabaga, parsnips, cabbage, or squash.

**"A few years ago we offered members the chance to volunteer instead of raising share prices,"** remembers Janaki Fisher-Merritt. **"Nope, they came back, 'Raise the prices. We are busy people.' Our operation could grow,"** said Janaki. **"We are actually struggling to stay at this plateau of membership."** The philosophy has been to diversify the product to members instead of growing in member numbers. **"It is a fairly stable CSA membership base now; many families have been with us since the very beginning eleven years ago."** Janaki clearly sees the CSA program as **"the difference between my parents paying themselves to farm or not making a living."** And he remarks that the farmers' market option would be too slow for them. **"You find yourself sitting all day Saturday at the market when you could be working on the land."**

Janaki challenges himself to improve the CSA on a regular basis. **"We want to start new things,"** he says, **"like more livestock. We currently have chickens and turkeys in this amazing intensive grazing set-up, but this place needs large animals as a part of the biological cycle. Many of our CSA members also want raw milk, and it's one of our dreams to sell it to them and not be dependent upon a large milk-processing company. All it would take is three or four cows."**

**"Farming in the CSA style allows me to experiment and solve problems. I use my curiosity. The CSA is a connection to people—a responsibility to them,"** says Janaki. **"I saw this as the power to influence the way I live."** ❖

### **"This hasn't been the easy route."**

On-site processing is no easier, and there, too, balancing labor with growth is a fine art. Mike and Merrisue Minar (along with many Minar family members) say that jointly creating Cedar Summit Farm, although rewarding, was not the easy choice. The day Merrisue gave birth to Nathan (15 months old at the time of this interview) Mike had to go in to work. The work that first year was so constant. By early 2004, the work was easing up a bit, and Merrisue said, **"Last October, we even left for a week's vacation."** ❖ Mike Minar figures he puts in 55-60 hours a week, down from an intolerable 80-hour week at the beginning. Their goal is to get the working day to a manageable one, while keeping it flexible.

Josh Van Der Pol chooses similar words, and weighs and balances his thoughts when asked about this goal of sustainability. **"Well, it isn't any easier, that's for sure,"** he states. His dad's farming practices made it possible (there was room, economically) for Josh to farm and he wanted this to be clear. Still, says Josh, **"It is actually harder to be marketing as well as farming. Yet the direct marketing customers are loyal; we want to keep them happy, and we see a future in it."** ❖

Currently the Van Der Pols market pork, beef, and chicken. They have dairy cows on the land (Minar's cows part of the year) and grow crops to feed all these animals. Cindy Van Der Pol manages the marketing relationships for Pastures A Plenty, and regularly e-mails customers about the week's happenings on the farm. Many customers remark that they love this detailed written connection to the land. Cindy also sends along recipes for vegetables.

Later in the interview, Josh Van Der Pol added, “When I was thinking about this interview and the feature article in the *Star Tribune*, the Food and Wine Expo of 2002, and meeting with Chef Andres about this year’s State Fair . . . all this attention . . . I figure I must be doing something people are interested in.” ❖

### **“There is the room and space and time.”**

What about the isolation of farming in this day and age? Thoughts came through in a few of the interviews. First, Malena Handeen was articulate on this topic: “I like that it can get isolated [out here]. You have room to believe what you want to believe. You make your own reality. You have to draw from somewhere, so either you are creating your own community, or you’re not. If I’m with people too much the same [as me], I don’t have to discipline myself—I can go on ‘cruise control.’ Out here, I really have to communicate. I’m surrounded by people who are not interested. I can’t pick out people who are just like me. But also there is the room and space and time, so I’m not turning into them. You can find your own identity.” ❖

Even with his New Jersey roots, Malena’s husband, Mike Jacobs, seems to be a match to his Milan location, and he speaks about living in community with a small number of people. “If you take on a person’s personality one at a time, with fewer people,” he says, “it opens me up to express more of my true self.” ❖

Craig Fernholz would probably disagree. He thinks the Madison, Minnesota, area needs people. “I think Dad’s a little worried that none of us are going to come back to the farm. I mean he’s really happy for us that we’re all

doing what we want to do, but at the same time he’s done all this work on the farm . . . So every time I go home . . . That’s why I had those thoughts the last time I was home [finding it ‘almost manageable’]. I want to explore more, but I do enjoy coming home. I do enjoy the calmness. Out there you can be who you want to be, I guess. But maybe I could convince some friends to move out there first. It needs people.” ❖

### **“That’s nice, but you’re not my constituent.”**

Amanda Bilek, who now works at the Minnesota Project, names one challenge for her generation as they delve into policy work. “If it was my choice tomorrow, I would start lobbying for sustainable agriculture, but I can’t do that because I don’t have the experience. I think you need a certain amount of experience or understanding before you just go in and start doing it. If you’re a college student going in and meeting with your representative or senator, they think it’s ‘nice that you’re taking an active role.’ Going in at my age, one response might be, “That’s nice, but you’re not my constituent, and you’re not a professional, so . . . why will your opinion matter to me?” ❖

Katie Fernholz finds her own challenges in the world of sustainable forestry, and must strike a balance. “I feel some conflict between how much is work and how much is living. I don’t want to work too hard and forget to enjoy. I could try too hard. But I focus on just doing better, not to let life control you, but to live fully engaged. I can see there’s an art and science to all of this—there is certainly an art to forestry.” ❖

**“You never know when you’re gonna learn.”**

Inga Haugen names education as the best strategy, and local education is best. Visit a farm, she says. **“Sit down with a group and say, ‘This is what I see and how I’d fix it.’ Then talk it through. That’s the best kind of learning—examining things from different viewpoints. It’s important to work in a group or team because someone will see if something’s gotten out of kilter—the team sees something one person didn’t notice. Then you sit down and ask, ‘Tell me how you see this situation.’ You put people first and grow food for them. Oh, and”** Inga adds, **“you also have to include *play* in the cycle of work and play.” ❖**

Heather Benson, who teaches environmental education and nutrition in an inner-city school in San Francisco, would likely agree with Inga’s style of learning. The community school has a rooftop garden and a ground-level garden, and the program also attracts kids from nearby apartment buildings. **“Education is key,”** says Heather, **“Some children know that chickens lay eggs and some do not have a clue about food or farming. I like it that here I can call on my background growing up on the farm” ❖**



**The Rutters  
in the  
greenhouse,  
summer 1993**