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From Front Page

Technology Plus Ancient Gleaning Concept Equals Food for the Hungry

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The Urban Farmers found a unique solution to a common problem in Lamorinda and identified a refreshing way to solve it. At the recent get-together, which outlined procedures for would-be volunteer crew chiefs, founder Siamack Sioshansi talked about the hidden crisis in America today – one out of six adults and one out of five children can't get enough to eat.

With a background in technology, this former CEO has the vision and bandwidth to craft a distinctive solution. He explains it makes a lot of economic sense to use shared resources like a van, ladders and buckets coupled with volunteer muscle to provide a significantly greater and healthier bang for the donation buck.

Originally the concept started when his son returned home after college graduation, focusing on growing food for the hungry in portions of unused Lamorinda backyards; the Urban Farmers supplied the labor and know-how, and homeowners supplied the water and the land to plant a garden.

Sioshansi found that while they were working on the build-a-garden concept, they were approached by neighbors with way more ripe fruit than they could possibly eat and give away. Turns out, simply harvesting existing fruit trees was a more efficient method and produced substantially more food with less labor. A lesson learned.

Since their inception, just a handful of years ago, the non-profit embraced a cooperative infrastructure model, similar to Wikipedia that, in theory, is expandable to other communities.

This very user-friendly horizontal structure makes it easy for groups and individuals to participate in harvests, and for residents to register one or more fruit trees. Already Saint Mary's College has committed to a number of harvests and Temple Isaiah has a sizeable amount of volunteers. The Urban Farmers' vision is that many people, each doing a small amount of work, coordinated through a reliable system, can create significant results.

Ever flexible and open to change, one unanticipated problem organizers found was a lack of crew chiefs to oversee volunteer harvesters. Sioshansi calls it a "bottleneck," and it's why the group hosted a pair of recent training events.

While not difficult, there are a few procedures and safety requirements needed to lead a worker crew on a weekend harvest route that typically makes a number of stops to collect fruit at Lamorinda backyards. Procedures for crew chief include briefing volunteer harvesters, giving maps with the locations of the day's picking, ladder and ground crew instructions, sorting the fruit into color-coded bins: Green for

perfectly fine; yellow, slightly imperfect for volunteers to enjoy; and red that will go to feed the animals at the Lindsay Wildlife Museum.

Arra Tojino, a recent graduate from Saint Mary's College, was in attendance at the crew chief training; she had participated earlier in the year as a volunteer harvester due to a community service requirement for a class. "I now have a better understanding," she explained; even after reading textbooks, when you physically do the work, a light bulb goes off.

Longtime volunteer Sue Schultz feels the Urban Farmers fill a niche: "Many older couples are not physically capable of harvesting," so this organization solves their problem, while in the process helps the working poor.

The trend is clear: with 5,500 pounds of food already harvested this year (31,000 pounds were harvested last year), the goal for 2013 is 50,000 pounds of healthy, local food getting delivered to hungry people.

In addition to harvesting, the organization recently partnered with Athenian School to plant 125 fruit trees and Youth Homes to plant 100 trees that will be providing the community with fruit for years to come. For more information about the charity, to register your fruit tree(s), or to sign up to help, visit www.theurbanfarmers.org.

Laguna Creek Repair Project Protects Nature

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Michael Vidra from BKF supervises the removal of concrete blocks from Laguna Creek. Photo Sophie Braccini

"On this side (downstream from the pipe), we will remove the concrete, clean the bank and slope it," says Vidra. "Large-diameter rocks will protect the banks from erosion, only a small portion of the bank will get a concrete wall."

As the construction crew does its job, field biologist Gretchen Zantzing comes by frequently to check on the fauna of the creek. "Before the work started we surveyed all the trees to check for

nests," she explains. "The Migratory Bird Act says that construction needs to establish a buffer zone around nesting areas until the young are gone."

Fortunately, no nests were found, but Zantzing continues to monitor the site almost daily. She is also mandated to make sure that endangered species such as the red-legged frog are not disturbed. "It is so great that this endangered animal is doing so well in Moraga," she says. Ap-

proval was obtained to take out some trees. "This is a lovely area and very few trees had to be removed," she says, "in fact the engineers are going to save some of them as they repair the banks."

The two staging areas for the work site are hidden behind trees and additional green screens are added on Friday afternoons when work stops so that the Hacienda de las Flores can be a bucolic wedding venue.