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Technology Plus Ancient Gleaning Concept Equals Food for the Hungry

By Cathy Tyson



Crew chiefs practice a harvest at the home of the Rossi Family in Lafayette, from left: Cathy Rambaud, Michael Kyelberg, Nadav Rave, Siamack Sioshansi, Arra Tojino, Christina Hensley, Peter Rossi with twin sons Mike (orange shirt) and Nic (white hat), Patricia Schultz, and Ken Madderra. Photo Andy Scheck

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.

"Anyone can do it," said board member Jeff Goodfriend as he exuberantly discussed some of the nuts and bolts to assembled do-gooders about becoming volunteer crew chiefs at a recent Urban Farmers training. The grassroots, non-profit organization addresses the problem of hunger in our local "world of plenty" and reduces the amount of perfectly good food going to waste while others are in need.

Where else can a group of people in four hours harvest roughly 1,000 pounds of local healthy food, while at the same time help out homeowners with an over-abundance of fruit by leveraging technology and man/woman power?

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

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