

## Growing a Garden of Access, Opportunity and Healing:

### The Voices of Eugene's Community Gardens

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*A view of the Willamette River wakes me up every morning as I emerge from my cocoon of sleep into the heavy wet valley air. On my bike I head upstream, which for this crazy river is south. Headwaters at Waldo Lake, the Willamette comes from some of the most oligotrophic waters in this US of A. What happens to it on the way? Everyone I talk to seems to know this river-land somehow: personally, casually, slowly or in passing. The river has infiltrated the mind and imagination of this valley just like it has defined its development. How do we treat the land around the river and what does this say about you, me, this Eugene that we consider as a 'community'? The further that I dig the more it becomes apparent: oral history is like the soil of this river valley, it is important because it belongs to each and everyone of us and must be cultivated as a common good.*

*Sometimes the water is brown, frothing the giddy banks pelted with rain.. Late at night under the stars it is glasslike and eerie. When the sun comes out it is a place to gather, breath, think, play music, meditate, and walk. Appreciate the ducks, herons, nutria, beaver, turtles, frogs, osprey, the cottonwood smell, willow catkins, alder cones. Feed the goose that the old couple has named Matilda. Smile at a stranger. Help plant native trees and vegetation. Work in a community garden. Put your hands in the soil. Imagine back 1000, 100, 10 years ago.*

*This river has been central to people for millennia. Back when it had a mile wide meander and created mosaics which, if seen from above would have been like a 10 rope tangle, green and gravels and sands, islands and marshy and wet and steep, shallow, swift and slow, vegetation patchy, diverse, dynamic. A pattern that reflects larger patterns... the pattern shifts with our community's meanders, now we see land change here and think of the rest of the world, the Ganges, Euphrates, Amazon or the muddy little stream in our backyard when it rains a lot, the swimming hole we once knew, The finca we grew up on, the way it used to be. The river is collective memory. Listen.  
...---E.G. February 2006.*

The land along the Willamette River has undergone many drastic changes over the past 200 years. It is a silent witness to environmental, social and cultural decisions. The soil of this river valley holds buried stories, some deep, and others just now being layered on the surface. In seeking a positive way to study agricultural land use in Eugene, the stories of the Community Gardens along the river were particularly compelling. What triggered their development? Who do they serve and what are their stories? By highlighting the diverse voices of individuals and groups involved in Eugene's Community Gardens I hope to show that a link between cultural,

social and environmental health is necessary in order to build a lasting and inclusive community. For this project I primarily focused on the Skinner City Farm site, while discussing the Alton Baker Community Garden and Whiteaker Community Garden sites in less detail. All three farms are located along the Willamette River in City Parks and Open Spaces land.

In this paper I discuss various groups in the Eugene/Springfield area that are given access to land through the Community Garden projects, including political refugees from Central and South America, other members of the Hispanic/Latino population, at-risk youth, the elderly as well as physically and mentally differently-abled individuals. In our society access to garden space is limited to these groups through various forms of discrimination contained in the structures and institutions of our society. These barriers can include physical, economic, legal, psychological language and education based barriers. The Community Gardens discussed in this paper as well as the nonprofit groups that are utilizing garden space are the main providers of access to marginalized groups. Nonprofits included are the Skinner City Farm, Huerto de la Familia, Siempre Amigos and Healing Harvest.

For this project I interviewed historians, nonprofit leaders, community garden members and founders, organic farmers and others. These include Jan Vandertuin and Karl Benedek at Skinner City Farm; Eduardo Pena, Mamfiel Muller, Ruth Forman and Aleta Alongi at Siempre Amigos; Sarah Cantril at Huerto de la Familia; Maggie Manitoba at Healing Harvest and Anastasia Sandow at Whiteaker Community Garden.

When I began this project, I had no idea how involved in a profoundly philosophical way I would get in the stories and visions of the people I interviewed. Not only have their voices shown me that my original sense of the positive contributions of the community gardens along the river is valid, but they have left me with a greater sense of a place I thought I knew well. I

hope hearing these voices will allow my readers to step outside of their daily struggles and appreciate the past and contemporary stories of a central feature of the place many of us call home.

### **Background of Eugene's Community Gardens**

Eugene's first Community Garden was founded in 1978 (Holt 2000). Community Gardens were part of a broader grassroots movement towards sustainability that began in the early 1970s with the organic movement. In developing Community Gardens, the hope was to break down the urban built environment and rural farm divide by giving people who did not have access to their own garden space a chance to grow food within the city itself (Sandow). It was also reclamation of public space that consciously recognized that caring for the soil is fundamental to overall health and food security of the community. The movement had and has huge potential for spreading local land-based knowledge in an informal and social oriented manner. The Community Garden movement is a microcosm of the potential that the larger community has for working towards sustainability through collective action and an emphasis on providing support, access and agency to marginalized members.

Finally, my motivation for this project was peaked by an oral history project that was completed in 1970s on "Century Farms", farms that were part of original Donation Land Claims of Lane County and that are recognized through the Oregon Department of Agriculture for their historical significance. The project contains transcribed interviews and history of small farmers in our area in hopes of maintaining a land ethic for local, small-scale production. It demonstrates how knowing, the history of a piece of land fosters a strong connection to it (Century Farm Project 1976). I hope that a parallel can be drawn to the Community Garden movement. Community Gardens seek a collective and cooperative longevity of land stewardship-thus it is

imperative that their stories of are recorded and heard so that the land too will continue to be cared for.

### **Agricultural History of the Willamette Valley**

The Willamette River Valley has been drastically transformed through human influences since Euro-American settlement in the region began in 1850. The riparian bottomlands, of which fragmented portions still exist today, supported diverse vegetation groups, fostered by the complexity of the channels (Dykaar 1996). The Native people of the Eugene area, the most recent group known as the Kalapuya, are recorded to have continuously occupied this area for at least the last 6,000-10,000 years (Toepel 1985). The Willamette riparian zone provided abundant food resources for the Kalapuya, especially during the summer months. Plants and animals such as wild celery, cow parsnip, skunk cabbage, cattails, salmonberry, thimbleberry, strawberry and blackberries, salal, wild rose, hazelnuts, ferns, many types of fish and shellfish were all collected for food (Juntunen 2005).

The Willamette prior to the damming and bank stabilizing revetments was a wide, meandering river that was subject to dynamic flood cycles. Composed of braided channels, islands, alcoves, shoals and a well functioning floodplain the river fostered a heterogeneous landscape (Willamette River Atlas 2002). The river-influenced land was a constantly shifting mosaic in which the river acted as a sediment conveyor, determining the rate of erosion and deposition. The creation of a rich and well-drained floodplain soil was a result of the dynamic cycles of inundation and deposition that are the foundation of a fluvial landscape (Willamette River Atlas 2002).

In 1850 there was an estimated 32,000 acres of flood plain habitat along the Willamette, yet by the year 2000, 85% of the riparian area had been converted to agricultural (65%) or

urban/rural development use (Atlas 2002). A soil survey of Lane County completed in 1993 showed that 90% of the best (class 1) agricultural soil in the county had been covered up by urban and rural development. Many of the areas that we tend to think of as food-crop productive land in the valley are actually grass seed and other non-food crops that are growing on the less productive class 4 and 5 clay soils (Atkinson). Most of the prime class 1 and 2 soils in the region are under our very own houses. This is why it is important to recognize the potential for urban land reclamation in Eugene.

### **Changing the Ways of the Water**

As the Euro-American Settler population grew so did the emphasis on flood control. The development of a rail and boat system for the transportation of agricultural goods increased the demand for fertile floodplain soil and created an economic incentive for controlling the river's flow (Willamette River Atlas 2002). The emphasis on flood control was part of a mentality that equated progress and productivity with the agricultural and industrial development of the valley so that it could be 'civilized' in a westernized way (Cottage Grove 2006).

The first flood control dam and reservoir system was completed in 1941, three years after the National Flood Control act made it a federal priority to limit flooding on the major rivers of the US. Today the Army Corp of Engineers controls 13 flood control dams along the tributaries to the Willamette. The Army Corp was also responsible for putting in revetments on 25% of the riverbanks, stabilizing and consequently channelizing the river (Taylor 2004). This includes some 90 miles of the riverbanks that have been hardened with riprap. Instead of providing flood control, these measures have often increased damage during high water times. In the catastrophic 1996 flood, the increased energy and erosion potential of the channelized river caused huge

damages to property built on what was formerly flood plain drainage area (Willamette River Atlas 2002).

The first Euro-Americans often settled on grassland and savanna open spaces, avoiding lower floodplain soils and riparian areas for fear of inundation in high-water times. As the damming projects allowed more agricultural land near the river to be put under cultivation and development, agriculture shifted from wheat and hops more towards orchard and nut crops, such as apples, plums, cherries and hazelnuts. These new 'riparian' inhabitants began a new chapter of commercial production where native riparian species like black cottonwood, wild hazelnut and Indian plum previously flourished. Many wet prairie species were also devastated by the increase in periods with no river bank overflow.

### **Ramifications of Large-scale Agriculture**

Today, the Willamette valley provides almost half of the Oregon's 3.8 billion in agricultural revenues. The Willamette valley ranks number one in the US for production of hazelnuts, cane-berries and rye-grass (Oregon State 2005). The largest percentage of revenue comes from mono-crops such as grass seed. These crops often require application of large amounts of chemical inputs and fertilizers. For example 43,992 tons of fertilizer was used in agricultural inputs in 2004 and over 60,000 in residential lawn and grass care. At present there is no requirement for pesticide use reporting in the state of Oregon (A reporting system will be implemented in 2007) so the exact types and amounts of pesticides runoff to soil and water is unknown (Oregon Department of Agriculture 2004).

The transformation to 'industrial' scales of agriculture has had huge environmental, political, social and economic ramifications. The disappearance of unique prairie, grassland, riparian and wetland habitats, changes in nutrient deposition, topsoil erosion and non-point

source pollution from runoff are a few examples of these negative agents of change (Willamette RiverKeeper 2006). Non-point source pollution, i.e. agricultural and urban run-off is still one of the largest pollution problems that the Willamette River faces today (Department of Environmental Quality 2006).

River pollution was first addressed by the city of Eugene in 1938, with the passage of a waste control measure to stop the dumping of raw sewage in the river (Robbins 2002). Still in the 1950s the river was extremely polluted by industrial chemical waste, agricultural runoff and the effects of urbanization and development along the banks. In 1966, the idea of creating a park system that spanned the length of the river running through Eugene was discussed in the legislative body. In 1967 Ex-governor Tom McCall put together the Willamette greenway proposal that established a committee to protect and restore the corridor along the Willamette (Robbins 2002). Through this legislation the city was able to acquire more parkland along the river and to push river health as a top priority.

More than ten years later the Community Garden movement was born and eventually was able to plug into these green spaces. The Community Garden movement provided land for positive environmental and social use; bridging the mental disconnect between developments, industry and commercial agriculture's positive short term economic benefits on one hand and the long-term environmental health of the community on the other. The gardens let people get out and see for themselves the importance of taking care of the land.

## **Skinner City Farm: A New Vision Born Through the Soil**

The Skinner City Farm project (SCF), a nonprofit organization, developed out of a neighborhood discussion concerning the land west of Skinners Butte. In 1997, the city dumped a huge excess of gravel and waste dirt on this site from a construction site downtown, covering potentially productive soil. This negative action brought neighbors and community members together to get the dirt removed. After many citizen complaints were filed, they were successful. Inspired by the ability of cohesive action to make change, a group of community members brought together naturalists, Parks Planning officials, farmers and nonprofits. They decided that the space could not only meet the goals of the Willamette Greenway proposal, but also enhance the historical and educational components of the site (Dixon 2000).

A 'talking circle' (City Workshop) was organized to elicit local histories, both of the land and the residents (Hope). In this amazingly rich ferment of stories and ideas the idea of founding a community farm on the site of Skinner's original land claim was proposed (Benedek). This plan was fit in with the city contracted revitalization plan for Skinner's Butte Park in which they hoped to address restoration, recreation, cultural, environmental and community garden potential in the park (Hostick 2002). Skinner City Farm took shape as a combination of a community garden, youth education program, sustainable agriculture and historical agricultural use demonstration site. One of its primary goals was to provide garden access for marginalized members of the community as a way to address local food security issues (See appendix 1). They offer individuals a space to garden as well as bringing together like-minded advocacy organizations in one space. The program also joins middle and high school kids and community members together do unique projects on the site. So far they have installed a 100 post fence, planted a living fence to surround it, and built gates utilizing drawings by Susan Applegate (a descendant



of an original pioneer family) with input from Esther Stutzman ( Native American. They also built a covered structure for a vermiculture program (the city's largest wormbin) (VanderTuin) and maintain 3 large plots at the site These youth are part of Center for Appropriate Transport (CAT) education program which runs an Alternative Education Program in partnership with local school districts.. In the next year the CAT education program will complete an oral history project based on the stories generated from interviews with local residents (Benedek).

Jan VanderTuin is the founder of CAT, a nonprofit that teaches about, advocates and manufactures sustainable alternative transportation technologies. He is also the co-founder and co-director of Skinner City Farm. As a key leader in the introduction of the idea of Community Supported Agriculture in the US, Jan has a long history in advocating sustainable means of food production and distribution. He said that the SCF project is vitally important to him because it addresses the fundamental issue at the heart of the survival of this community: local food security. When we look at food security issues we must ask the question of who is allowed the privilege of access to productive land and what does that indicate about the future of our community?

Unlike other Community Gardens in Eugene, the farm has organizational plots, meaning they are partnered with other nonprofits that rent out the same space every year. This means that each plot will be consistently maintained through group membership and costs will be lowered for the participants. So far, two of the groups involved advocate for the Latino community in Eugene and hope to provide their clients and volunteers with a safe place (both in terms of soil health and food safety and in terms of physical safety) to grow food for their own families and friends. The SCF project is a prime example of how a negative use of the land was turned into a positive change that culminated in the creation of an amazing educational tool for the

community. I will focus on two nonprofit organizations that are renting plots at the SCF that both work to increase access to land for the Latino population, but first, background of the SCF site.

### **History of the Skinner City Farm Site**

The Skinner City Farm sits on a historically important site. It is located north of Cheshire Avenue in Skinner's Butte Park. The land was a once a wet prairie, and although records are few, it is thought that the Kalapuya used the Butte as a lookout and the area beneath as a food gathering site (Hostick 2002). In 1851, the first Euro-American settler, and namesake of the town, Eugene Skinner, staked his 640 acre Donation Land Claim from the west of the butte, including what is today Skinner's Butte Park. A Donation Land claim meant that you had to cultivate and develop the land for four years, and it was yours for free! As well as small scale farming, the Skinner family opened up a trading post, post office and a ferry (Moore 1995). Eugene Skinner and Charnal Mulligan, another early settler, both donated 40 acres for the initial town area. In 1853 Skinner donated more of his land for public use, including county buildings. Skinner stood on the butte and delimited the boundaries of the town and mapped out the streets (Skinner's Mudhole).

Skinner and the other settlers of the first half of the 19th century survived at first through individual agricultural production, and by raising cattle, sheep, and hogs. Most farming was subsistence based. In the push to become economically stable, more and more of the fertile land was brought under cultivation, often with no thought for the future soil health and productivity (Bowen 1978). The move to grow commercially was initially bolstered by a boom in the production of wheat and hops in the early 1900s and later moved to fruit and nut crops along the river (Carter 1996). The exact land of the new Skinner City Farm project was most likely part of Skinner's orchards adjacent to his fields and pastures The SCF site has since been used as

orchard land and for other agricultural production. Later it was developed as housing before becoming unused grass space as part of the park (Card 1999).

In 1914, sixty-seven acres of land that belonged to the public water company that owned the reservoir on Skinner's Butte was designated as a public park named after Skinner. This park soon became the center of Eugene social life. It was a public camping and picnic spot, a swimming hole with amenities and bathhouse. Many festivals were held here and the park was maintained and subject to beautification efforts by such groups as the Business Women's Club (Hostick 2002). Tree plantings were held as well as work parties to get rid of unseemly vegetation that was crowding out the grassy areas in the years after annual fires set by the Kalapuya were stopped (Robbins 1997).

As the rich agricultural history of the SCF site reveals, from Kalapuya, to Eugene Skinner, from orchards to fill dirt—one piece of land can capture the history of an entire community. Skinner City Farm is creating space recognizes the importance of this history and is providing space for many new stories to be born through working the land.

### **Huerto de la Familia at Skinner City Farm**

Sarah Cantril started Huerto de la Familia to give low-income Latina women a place to grow food. She soon expanded to include families in the program and has had an increasing number of participants ever since. This year she plans on having up to 30 families involved in the program, around seven of those at SCF and the rest at Churchill and other sites. Most of the members are from Mexico, mainly from Oaxaca, reflecting the demographics of Mexicans in Oregon as a whole. The members who are part of the SCF site live mostly in the Whiteaker neighborhood which is very nearby to the garden and also one of the areas of Eugene with the

largest population of Latinos. Huerto de la Familia tries to provide a material and educational base for their participants, according to Sarah:

The basic idea is to give low income Latino families a chance to have their own vegetable gardens and learn how to grow vegetables organically, we provide the seeds, plants and materials and subsidize the plots...we do classes on health related topics like diabetes and nutrition and we've done growing and using medicinal herbs. The idea basically started to be able to help Latino families add to their food supply and it has just grown over time.

They have also provided child based activities and fun events in the garden space during the growing season. Sarah emphasized the vital community that was created by participants at SCF:

I've had a family comment to me that the only place they can count on the family being together is at the garden, because of work schedules, school schedules, just the business of life. The mother told me that being at the garden improved her communication with her children. To me that is just as important as harvesting food to put on the table. Families generally learn about the project by word of mouth, people tell their neighbors, friends, or people they go to church with.

Besides these concrete emotional and social benefits, Sarah commented that providing land for families to follow through a complete cycle of planting, caring and harvest was liberating for those members who might have had worked or continued to work as migrant farm workers:

Some families are separated for part of the year because one member has to go and pick or some families have had to leave the program to go and pick....One particular family were migrant farm workers for 15 years and they had three children during that time, so their children were traveling with them also, they have been stable now for two to three yrs, or maybe three to four, and their plots were absolutely incredible and completely productive. One thing I do see with families is a sense of pride, and a sense of control and ownership over something that is truly theirs. People take very good care of their plots and stay in the same plot year after year.

Sara had a lot to say about the benefits of being at the Skinner City Farm site. The participants meet with the founders of the farm and learn about the agricultural history of the site and the importance of carrying that history forward as stewards of the land. There is also the added environmental education benefit of being by the river. Sarah commented that it is much easier to

discuss organic gardening and the negative effects of runoff because the river was right there as a visual tool. SCF is easily accessible for members that lived in the Whitaker neighborhood, which is important because: "Some families say that the garden is the only place they feel safe to be outdoors, the only place they feel like their kids can run around and connect with nature" (Cantril). This is often because the cheapest housing in our community is near busy streets or all concrete areas or with no outdoor space that is safe for kids to play in. Higher occurrence of pollutants is another concern. The Whiteaker neighborhood and other neighborhoods that are home to a higher percentage of low income and Latino families, appear to be areas with the most industrial pollution, including long-term water and soil pollution from the rail yard and railroad herbicide spraying (Oregon Toxics Alliance 2006)

#### **A History of Latino's in the Willamette Valley**

Sarah's comments lead me to ask why there is virtually no recorded history of the Latino population in Eugene. What does it mean to deny a history, intentionally or not, to certain populations? It is necessary for history to be inclusive if we are to make decisions in this community that respond to the entire population's needs today and into the future. Yet when I attempted to retrieve documentation about the history of non-white groups in Eugene, I was shocked to find little recognition and of that, almost nothing positive. At the Lane County Historical Museum, I made a request for information regarding the history of Hispanic populations in Eugene. Without even looking, the answer I got was, "unfortunately we don't have any information on that topic". In Oregon, race played a large role in who got written into the history books and reflects upon our community structure today. For example, the Eugene census of 1870 included nonwhite categories but there is no additional information about who these people were and what their lives were like (Carter 1996).

The blatant racism of many of Eugene's first citizens effectively stalled the diversification of the city proper, this discrimination also became ingrained in the workings of our institutions (Holt 2000). For example, for many years non-white individuals were written out of property deeds or were denied housing. Immigration and Naturalization services (INS) have deported people in ways that deny them their human rights or the right to a hearing (Holt 2000). It is therefore important to read the stories of the participants of the SCF project in a broader context of Latino immigration and history in Oregon.

Eugene and Springfield are home to a rapidly growing Hispanic/Latino population estimated by one member at over eight percent of the total population (Moreno). While this includes people from many diverse backgrounds, countries and states, the largest population, as Sarah noted, is from Mexico. The first large wave of immigrants from Mexico was during the Bracero Program). In this program, Mexican men were contracted to work legally as farm workers from 1942-1964, at first in order to supplement the lack of male farm workers because of duties in WWII. In Oregon, 15,000 Mexican men worked during the initial 1942-1947 period. According to an 87-year-old Ex-Bracero, Bracero workers were often treated like animals, subject to strip-searching, not fed adequately and required to give large portions of blood for injured US soldiers. Additionally, 10% of their pay was put in a fund for use on return to Mexico but has still never been returned (Pavon). Law 78, passed in 1952, renewed the Bracero Program and allowed growers to hire Braceros for labor 'emergencies'. Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants became Oregon's main source of farm labor (Oregon Historical Society 2006). This is not only from the Bracero program, but also with the huge influx of so-called "illegal" immigrants who contribute immensely to the economy and receive no benefits

Labor contractors often did not abide by their Bracero contract, but the sway of the agricultural agenda in government was so strong that the Bracero rules were not often enforced:

When American farm workers walked off the job to protest poor wages or working conditions, farm owners would import Braceros to harvest the crop, destroying the bargaining power of the American farm workers. This use of Braceros was expressly prohibited in the Bracero Program (“The Bracero Program” 2006).

The use of Braceros in opposition to American workers added to a long-standing anti-immigrant sentiment in many parts of Oregon. Many of these workers went home after the program ended and then returned to Oregon with their families only to face racism, low paying and unsafe jobs. Most migrant farm workers have faced and still face extremely challenging working and living conditions. In Oregon migrant farm workers pick over 70% of our crops. Still, despite these hardships, farm workers have managed to become an organized and united front in many respects, confronting growers and fighting for increased rights even with risk of deportation. According to Oregon Action, a migrant farm workers in Oregon fits this profile: "Average life expectancy is 47, Average annual income is \$6,500; 94% don't receive health insurance; 89% don't get paid vacation or holidays; 55% don't get unemployment insurance. They are frequently exposed to pesticides and hazardous working conditions" (2003). Federal laws that govern wages and hours, meal breaks, overtime, and many benefits do not apply to farm workers. Also, although, Piñeros y Campesinos Unidos (PCUN), Oregon's farm workers union, has won contracts for some of Oregon's farm workers, the employers are not required by law to recognize the union, thus any attempts to strike and improve working condition can be met with threats and retaliation through wage cuts or firing (Stephens 2003). In this way, the people who are harvesting our food are often allowed no power over the decisions that are made concerning the land (Oregon Action 2003).

As this short glance into the past shows, this history of land use has an extremely important human component that is not often considered. What would the Oregon story be today without migrant farm workers? I hope that giving voice to families working with in the community gardens will address the silence in this and other related topics.

### **Siempre Amigos at Skinner City Farm**

Today, the number of Latino farm workers in the Eugene area is decreasing as service sector jobs in the Eugene Springfield and outlying areas increase, it estimated that in the Eugene area 60% of the Hispanic population is working in service sector jobs, construction and landscape and only 10% in agriculture (Moreno). There are also number of Central American immigrants in the Eugene area, many of who fled violence and tragedy in their home country. A few organizations in the Eugene area work to represent and advocate for the Latino community. One of the ways they are doing this is to provide space for Latino families to cultivate their own vegetables.

Siempre Amigos association, as a branch of Oregon Health Science University's Intercultural Psychiatric Program (OHSU-IPP) provides bilingual support, networking, counseling, legal, medical and education services for survivors of trauma, persecution, torture and political violence from Central and South America (Rebuilding Lives 2004). Part of the program involves outings, potlucks and celebrations for associated families as well as providing a garden space for those who are interested. Last year they relocated their garden project to join the new community organizational plots at Skinner City Farm Project. The garden project reconnects members with agricultural experience in their home countries, puts food on the table and tries to initiate a sense of healing and mental health (Alongi).



I first connected with the members of this project at the Siempre Amigos building. With my less than amazing Spanish skills, I introduced myself and was warmly welcomed into a goodbye potluck for one of their staff members. I was honored and inspired by the generosity and openness of the members that I spoke with. Ruth Vargas Forman, the Clinical Supervisor of the program, introduced me to last years' participants in the garden project at Skinner City Farm so that I could set up interviews. The two men I interviewed were leaders, both of Siempre Amigos and in the design and cultivation process for the garden plot at the new SCF site.

### Aleta Alongi

As a longtime volunteer with Siempre Amigos in their mental health programs, and as the garden coordinator in the past, Aleta Alongi was there when the garden project was just a few beds housed in the backyard of the Amigos de los Sobrevivientes house. The demographics of the clients of Siempre Amigos changes every year, although Aleta noted that a majority of the participants she has worked with in the garden are of indigenous Guatemalan descent, most from rural areas. This meant that many participants had past experience with farming or gardening. Once they arrive in Oregon it is impossible for most immigrant families to get access to land that can be used to grow food crops. This can be due to legal status, economic hardship, lack of housing in general, isolation and overall accessibility of land. It seems ridiculous that in a very fertile valley it is hard to get land to grow your own vegetables on, but the reality is that structural and societal barriers are real and difficult to surpass-- as is the fact that much of the best soil is underneath concrete.

The garden program has been a huge success. Aleta was amazed by the work ethic and enthusiasm of the members, especially when the garden project was moved to the Skinner's City Farm site. This move was a symbolic transition for the organization, and had a transforming

effect on the whole project. Aleta commented that, "The group effort in the garden increased ten times when we moved to the Skinner City Farm space". She thinks this was a way to represent themselves positively to the community and create a garden they could be proud of, consequently, she remembered, "everything this group did became unbreakable". Mamfiel, one of the men that I interviewed, mentioned the same dynamic. He said that other groups often commented on their plot because it was so architectural in design and very productive.

The cooperation required to create a functioning garden space was also a way to foster a community among the members of Siempre Amigos. They had monthly meetings to design the space, set up watering schedules and figure out ways to fundraise to help pay for the plot. The symbolism inherent in gardening, in terms of re-growth, becomes especially important for survivors of torture and persecution that are attempting to rebuild their lives. This symbolism was strongly vocalized by the participants themselves. In fact, Aleta noted that in group meetings post September 11th, 2001, the garden project was specifically mentioned as a way to facilitate renewal, re-growth and a unity within families. One participant commented that working the land was what the world, as a whole, needs in order to heal. In this way, local personal experience in the garden space was used as a tool to help mental clarity and vision during a emotionally hard time.

By giving access to land, the garden component of Siempre Amigos thus helps to not only create a direct connection to participants' past lives, but provides a way to grow food that is healthier and cheaper than what is available in the grocery store. One anecdote struck me as particularly telling. Aleta said that oftentimes they plan to grow something in excess so as to have enough to share with families that don't have time to garden. At the end of the corn harvest last year, the garden members brought bags of corn to a Siempre Amigos meeting, one for every

family. This soil, which was just 9 years ago covered in gravel and debris, is now growing stories and strong bonds alongside the corn and beans. I talked to two men who are crucial to the success of the Siempre Garden project, Eduardo Pena and Mamfiel Muller.

### Eduardo Pena

On a cold clear day in February I met with the extremely articulate Eduardo Pena. Eduardo has worked with the Siempre Amigos ever since he came to Eugene from El Salvador with his family in 2001 following the tragic death of his oldest son. In El Salvador he worked as first as an agricultural scientist, then as an economist for the Embassy. Not only has Eduardo spent many years growing vegetables and marketable food crops, but he also has experience working in large-scale coffee plantations. Since his arrival in Eugene he did not have a chance to work the land until his involvement in the SCF community garden project last year. The project has connected him with other members of the community, including families from Huerto de la Familia, and given him a chance to try and farm organically, which was not what he was used to.

Eduardo said that cultivating the land provided him with a positive reconnection to his past, a sense of productivity and a revitalization of spirit. It was also just a relaxing way to spend the weekend, and he told me about times that he and his wife had walked down to the river together and enjoyed watching the bikes, boats and pedestrians going by. The garden had the added benefit of having enough food to feed way more than their family at the end of the harvest. Eduardo stressed the idea of spreading the benefits of the program to a wider community; he said he wanted people to know that:

In general this is an experience that is worth the effort. I invite everyone to join, because if you have the opportunity to cultivate you will see the process of the insignificant seed growing until the plant produces a fruit. It is a experience of the spiritual type; mental, spiritual, and material all combined. The garden gives back a similar type of satisfaction, fulfillment for the spirit and the mind. And in the end another important benefit is that, for a time what we harvest replaces what we

would buy in the supermarket. We harvest it and we bring it home, from the garden to the house [Translated by Eleanor Gordon 2006]

*En general, es una experiencia que vale la pena. Yo invito a cual quier es para que si tengan la oportunidad pueden ir a cultivar y ver desde que si siembran la semilla insignificante, hasta que la planta producir una fruta. Es una experiencia hasta el tipo espiritual, mental, epsiritual y material. La satisfacción que retorna, claro, es en los mismos termos, una satisfacción para el espiritu y la mente... Y reunir en el aspecto que por un tiempo ese productos en vez de que compramos en el supermercado, los cosechamos y los llevamos a la casa, la huerto a la casa*

Eduardo was knowledgeable about the plants, soils and insect life in the Willamette Valley and made references to similarities and differences between crops, pests and soil quality between El Salvador and Eugene. He was also well aware of the responsibility of the grower to care for what he called the rich fluvial soil of the valley and the degradation of much of it: “In my opinion the Willamette valley soils are very good, very rich, but after many years of being under agricultural production they are used up and any crop that is of a successful commercial scale needs to be fertilized” in some way. Although Eduardo did not advocate using entirely organic methods, especially in term of controlling pests and fertilizing, he recognized very deeply that caring for the land was the most important part of the gardening process.

### Mamfiel Muller

Mamfiel Muller, grew up on a farm in San Marcos region of Guatemala and worked on farms as a young man. He learned everything he knew about agriculture from his father. They grew mostly coffee but also corn and bananas. He was then trained as an engineer and worked in the city until he moved here. He described the reconnection to land he found last year working in the garden:

In the past year I had the opportunity to cultivate some plants here in Skinner Park through the Siempre Amigos group that I belong to. This suited me very well because I began to remember many of the things I had left behind thirty years before. It made me very happy because I was able to relax, the time passed pleasantly, it is like some say, more than anything like therapy to be growing and working the land. This was very beautiful, for me it is very beautiful because I miss the land that I was born on.... I really enjoyed this experience [Translated by Eleanor Gordon 2006].

*Y el año pasado precisamente tuve la oportunidad de cultivar algunas cosas aquí en Skinner Park por medio del grupo Siempre Amigos en el cual yo pertenezco. Y pues me hizo muy bien porque empecé recordar muchas de las cosas de las cuales se huyeron más de treinta años. Y estuvo muy bien porque se relaja, el tiempo se va pasando, como quien dice, es más que todo como terapia para estar cultivando y arreglando la tierra. Y eso fue muy bonito. Sí para mí es muy bonito porque yo agorro la tierra, la cual en que naci... y me gusta mucho.*

Mamfiel also made a direct connection between access to land and being productive and working for the good for your community:

Without a doubt it should not cost anything for someone to cultivate and produce a little, at the very least we should be more productive in this country. I have always been very productive, not only in terms of working the earth, but I also try to help my community. I did the same thing in the communities in my country. I have had the opportunity to help many different communities in many different places for different types of community service. I would say that here, if this city had plots of land where we could work the land without paying a cent, that would be great, because then we are saving money...we are producing food for ourselves [Translated by Eleanor Gordon 2006].

*Sino que debía ser "free" o libre para que uno pueda cultivar y producir algo, o por lo menos ser más productivo en este país. Porque de hecho yo siempre he sido muy productivo, no solo en la tierra sino también tratando de ayudar a mi comunidad. Lo hice de igual manera en mis comunidades en mi país. Tuve la oportunidad de ayudar a muchas comunidades de diferentes estados o diferentes lugares para diferentes tipos de ayuda comunitaria. Yo diría que aquí si esta ciudad tiene tierras o tiene lugares donde podíamos perfectamente muy bien trabajar y sin pagar ni un solo centavo, pues, Qué bueno porque entonces nos estamos ahorrando dinero y como vuelvo a repetir estamos siendo productivos y estamos produciendo para nosotros mismos.*

Through this initial move toward food security and safety, there is a secondary benefit of joining together land-based knowledge from diverse sources in one place. For example, both Eduardo

and Mamfiel have a combined experience working on various scales of farms in Central America and are working in close connection to many of the SCF leaders who have many years combined experience in the small organic farm and community garden movement. There is the potential for a ferment of ideas concerning a land ethic and community building which is unique to a community approach to agriculture, recognizing the diversity within our community and advocating for that in a positive way by giving people space is letting people give back to the land.

### **Alton Baker Park: Healing Harvest**

Maggie Manitoba grew up in Los Angeles. She moved to Oregon 27 years ago, in search of a nature that was more accessible. I found her weeding the Swiss chard and other winter greens in the wheelchair accessible garden plots at Alton Baker Park, the cold sunlight melting low over the Doug firs. When she arrived in Oregon she found herself trapped in a corporate job, eating her lunch inside of a sterile cafeteria, not what she had pictured. After helping her father recover from a stroke by planting peas with him outdoors, Maggie got very excited about the potential of horticultural therapy. When she lost her job in 2002 she got her master gardener certification and founded the nonprofit 'Healing Harvest' based on the idea of therapy through gardening. Her newest garden project is right in the Alton Baker Community garden only a few hundred meters from the river edge. Big Doug firs and maples rise above the fences of the garden; herons fly overhead and ospreys nests nearby. The garden plots, once bathrooms are installed, will provide wheelchair accessible garden space. People with physical barriers to gardening are usually denied the chance to garden—Maggie is helping to change that. The city built the beds and Maggie runs and coordinates the space. She works with seniors, at risk youth, mental and physically differently-abled individuals and various other groups in the community.

We work with different populations with the therapeutic horticultural in mind that's the goal, to get people out here, to get their hands dirty, into the dirt. To put them in a different place and space away from what they've been doing or what their environment has been. It gives them socialization skills, gives them physical exercise, we have a lot of cognitive activities that we do too.

Maggie herself was transformed through her experience gardening and said she had an epiphany the first time she ate lunch outside in the first garden that was part of her program.

My first week out (in the garden) was a day like today, I was having my lunch and just the week prior to that I was in this sterile concrete building with a sterile atmosphere having my lunch in the conference room...what a difference! There is nothing like being outdoors...that connection with the earth. I think that is also very important for the kids ...this gives them another opportunity to be out there (outdoors), even if sometimes they don't like it, eventually they do! It gives them a different perspective on things.

Working with particular groups is an important factor in the impact that the gardening can have.

Maggie's glowing eyes and enthusiasm for the space and her project drew me in immediately.

She has obviously imparted that enthusiasm to the people that she works with. For example, the at-risk youth she works with often do not want to participate in the garden when they first come out. They take a mental health survey before and after their garden experience, and they are always doing better. In fact, Maggie says she sees improvement in many participants after just one day in the garden.

For a lot of people gardening is therapeutic, but this even takes it to a different level... It's just so transforming out there the garden, I can't explain it, you just have to see it! To experience it, it's pretty awesome! We are always learning out there, every day we learn something, even I learn something, so there is no time wasted out there, we always are engaged in all kinds of activities, they come away with something everyday. Every time we get together.

She says it makes the kids more aware of their environment and surroundings in general, helping to bring a better sense of focus to other parts of their lives.

If nobody has had this experience before they will be more conscious of what is around them after the experience. I know that for a fact! These kids that I had last year... one person had not had any experience in a garden and after the course she

was pretty changed, at least a little more conscious about what was happening around her. Even the folks who have been gardening, the oldsters, they respond to this very well...they don't get to go out much, so being outdoors is such a bonus for them when they can go out... It gives people opportunities who haven't had the opportunities to garden and to really successfully garden.

Similar to Sara's discussion of the river as a teaching tool, Maggie noted that being located in a park space next to the river was very important in cultivating a sense of environmental awareness in the participants:

It is just incredible, the wildlife that you see in and around the area...lots of times I just sit and watch like...I just saw a hawk going over there, and it is like 'wow!', you don't see this, where I came from anyway, the big city.... You see all this happening around here, and it has a profound effect, makes you more conscious about what you are doing to your garden...you are just more connected with all the things that are around here, you don't want anybody building big buildings around here, you are more conscious about what the environment is around here. *You have this little microcosm here and you want to protect it and everything around it.*

As we can see by Maggie's experiences, the space along the river is being reclaimed as a positive contribution to our community that spreads beyond the garden walls, into the lives of individuals who are denied access to many opportunities in this town. It provides a change of pace, a breathe of fresh air, a connection between generations and life experiences.

### **Whitaker Community Garden: An Old Standby**

Since I moved into my new house this winter right next to the Whiteaker community garden, I feel I have an insider's view into the world of the garden as I pass it a few times daily. As I tried to find a member of the garden to interview I kept coming across the same name: Anastasia Sandow. Anastasia moved to Eugene 13 years ago. She is not a native Oregonian yet says she feels more attached to this land in a strong and dynamic way that she has ever felt before. Her work with the Community Garden space is a factor that she attributes to this strong sense of place. Working the land forces you to pay attention to the details of a place and to



remember cycles form year to year. Anastasia said that this agricultural connection to land also makes her feel as if she is contributing to the balance of the world. Beyond direct connection to the environment of the place, its soil, seasonal idiosyncrasies, its native plants, invasive, rainfall are social benefits of being around other people who are tuned into the local community's sustainable infrastructure and people's battles. Anastasia said that working in the garden tapped her right away into what was going on in Eugene in terms of local issues and projects such as the SCF project.

We begin to make a community by building stories and friendships out of vegetables. Anastasia told me about a new couple that moved into a plot near to hers. They were amazed with the way she was growing her bean crop, calling her 'bean queen'. They eventually moved to the East Coast and worked on a CSA there. One day Anastasia received a letter: In it were all types of beans just for the bean queen. The next time she heard from them was when they returned from Central America, again, with a multitude of bean varieties to share with the community garden. This idea of sharing, both seed and harvest is an immediate benefit of working in close proximity to others. We saw this before with the Siempre Amigo members bringing a bag of corn to everyone at their group meeting. Beyond material gifts, this idea of sharing brings people together.

### **Conclusion**

The Willamette riparian zone has come a long way from its use as a food resource of the Kalapuya or its use as an orchard by the first pioneers—yet today it maintains its role as healer, even as it seeks to heal itself. It is important that we as a community see the importance of maintaining spaces along the river that are healthy. As Eduardo, Mamfiel, Anastasia, Aleta and Maggie articulated it is important to voice your appreciation of place, so more people will realize

its value. Like Maggie said just having the chance to be out in a garde, near the river makes you realize that you do not want green spaces developed and that yes, eating lunch in a garden with others can be an awareness enhancing and perhaps spiritual experience. When we are grounded in the soil, awareness of place and self can filter through into positive interactions and decisions concerning the larger community.

The Skinner City Farm, Alton Baker Park and Whiteaker sites have created places for people in Eugene area who do not have agency or access in this community, to come together in a positive way. These garden spaces represent a shift in our approach to the banks of the Willamette. By looking at what can be utilized for the soil health and aesthetic appeal, as well as social contact and building of long lasting friendships and partnerships the values of economics and development are pushed out of the equation. Community gardens go beyond the simple role of providing healthy food. They are in a sense ‘beyond the organic industry’ in which consumerism, wage labor, conglomeration, and problems of capitalism still limits access to the healthiest food, water and environment to those with economic and institutional privilege in our society. As a community, we can change this system by starting with the basics—learning to help each other to grow our own organic food.

The garden programs were all referred to as therapy in some way. The idea that there is something healing about making something grow is not new, but is often forgotten even by those who ascribe to sustainability. Using the garden program as therapy is a way to connect people firmly to this place and thereby spread that care and growth outward toward other positive impacts in the community. The diverse stories and amazing projects encompassed in this paper reflect the power that the recognition of the combination of social justice and environmental activism can have on a community. These testimonies show that there is an important overlap

between the movement for sustainability and local food security and a move toward providing access to community resources for marginalized members of the community. In this sense 'community' can be redefined to emphasize the importance of access to land based resources.

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## Appendix 1

## The Purpose of Skinner City Farm



The purposes of Skinner City Farm include the following:

To create and operate a public agricultural site which will involve the Eugene community in the process of designing and operating community gardening areas;

To create agriculturally based youth programs that will involve and assist young people, with an emphasis on programs for at-risk youth, troubled youth, and youth whose needs are not adequately met in public schools or other standard educational institutions;

To demonstrate and educate the general public about sustainable and ecologically-sound agriculture, agricultural ecosystems, and socially and ecologically appropriate agricultural techniques and technologies;

To work with local public and private schools to increase the educational opportunities available in the Lane County region by providing hands-on agricultural educational programs which students from all of the region's schools can visit and become involved;

To offer programs and opportunities for people from diverse ethnic backgrounds and disadvantaged sectors of the population including homeless people, people of color, and disabled people; and

To educate the general public about the historical role and importance of small farms and agriculture in this region, and to operate a historically accurate demonstration of the "Skinner Farm" as operated by Eugene Skinner (the founder of the city of Eugene) and his family.

<http://www.efn.org/~scf/purpose.htm>

Pictures:

bracero

SCF amigos

Maggies

My own of whiteaker

List

Maggie

Anastasia

Jan

Karl

Bob hostick

Matt mcrae

Trevor taylor

Anastasia

Eduardo

Mamfiel

Ruth

Aleta