

OWL & SPADE

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What he brings to the table

By Elizabeth Lutyens

"What we do about food is crucial, both for the quality of the next generation, our own American children, and children everywhere, and also for the quality of our responsible action in every field. It is intimately concerned with the whole problem of the pollution and exhaustion of our environment, with the danger that man may make this planet uninhabitable within a short century or so."

Margaret Mead's prophetic quote, from her 1970 essay, "The Changing Significance of Food," appeared seventeen years before the world got its first official definition of sustainability. Although the word "sustainable" has since been appropriated by everyone from Hollywood actors to hawkers of wrinkle cream, its early explication was a model of plainspeak: "Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

What are these needs? In a 2003 WorldWatch article ("What Is Sustainability, Anyway?"), the authors suggest that the amorphous "sustainability" can be sculpted into four dimensions: human survival, biodiversity, equity, and life quality. Although human survival is of course the first essential, it is worth little, the authors emphasize, without "the survival of humans as communities of individuals."

This takes us to Marc Williams, a 2004 graduate of Warren Wilson with a degree in Environmental Studies, who credits food as the solution to bringing people together in an essential way. Marc says, "From the garden to the table, from one person to the other gathered around the table . . . candles, stories, laughter, saying grace. Not necessarily a religious grace, but a way to give thanks for food and companionship. Food is the core of community."

While today's typical foodstuff travels 1800 miles before landing on a plate, burning fossil fuels while being trucked, refrigerated, and packaged, the food that Marc's community of eaters puts on the table is from the garden or woods or stream just outside the door. And unlike much "global food," this local fare has not been treated with pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, or hormones, or subjected to genetic modification. At Warren Wilson, when Marc arrived, he found the promise of what he calls "one of the most sustainable food systems in the country." He declared his major in Sustainable Agriculture and began a study that "eventually morphed into an all-out analysis of the economic, environmental, and social sustainability of the food system at Warren Wilson."

Feeding the need for community: the Jones Mountain apple orchard

Early in the 2003-2004 school year, as Marc approached graduation day and his next step in life, he created a resume that ended with this typically unorthodox statement: "It is my heart-song dream to own a restaurant and grow the food for it within the framework of community."

Less than a year after writing that, he sits on the front porch of a rambling log structure opposite a mountainside ripening with fall color. Just below is "Old 23," a winding road that leads from the outskirts of Mars Hill into Tennessee. At the moment, there are no cars in sight, since most traffic chooses the behemoth new Interstate that bisects a mountain nearby. But it's nearly four o'clock in the afternoon, and soon a procession of cars will snake up the road, not on their way to Tennessee, but to Marc's new restaurant--"Papa's"--a response to residents of this Madison County community who expressed a need for a local eating and gathering place. With his business partners, Joe Robas and Jason Griffis, Marc also operates Natural Harvest Foods, an organic catering and food-concession business. He uses ingredients that he grows or forages, or that he and his partners buy from neighboring farmers. A dream come true--almost overnight.

Laura Lengnick, who teaches Sustainable Agriculture at Warren Wilson, is not surprised at his success. She says, "Marc has asked himself how he, as one person, can create sustainability in his life and his community, and he understands that food is the key. Many anthropologists and social scientists make the case that industrialization has destroyed communities, that basic cultural

threads were broken when we broke connection with the land. And our most basic relationship with the land is food. If someone should ask, 'What is the point--food, or community?' my answer is yes. You can't have one without the other. What inspires Marc, from my perception, is both. He's motivated to feed people, but in a richer sense of the word than providing calories. He's feeding our need for community."

Marc tapped into that need when he decided to make the rehabilitation of the apple orchard on Jones Mountain his Senior Project.³ He was introduced to the ailing orchard during his first semester, when he and other students in Dr. Lengnick's Principles and Practices of Farm Production class used it as the subject of a farm management plan. Marc was already interested in apples, which he says are "a big source of pride in Western North Carolina, part and parcel of the region." However, since the production of apple products has become agribusiness, outsourced to other parts of the world, he believes that "local farmers need a niche market, and growing organically seems like a good solution." He wanted to create a working model for other aspiring organic apple growers, and at the same time to supply the College with nutritious fruit from its own lands.

He says, "I was such a novice. As a Master Gardener, I'd attended a class on orchards, but still--I had no idea what a big project I was taking on." Marc interviewed local experts and spent many hours at the Mountain Horticultural Research Center in Hendersonville. Dr. Lengnick, the advisor for Marc's project, says, "Organic apple production is a cutting-edge field. There is not a lot of information readily available, so it was an intellectual challenge for Marc to seek it out. He collected what he found from diverse sources and integrated it

into a production manual for the College and the region."

She adds, "Marc met all the project requirements by creating and completing a plan, a process that allowed him to learn the practical aspects of renovation, and the skills, technologies, and finances involved--how to grow apples from business aspects as well as from horticultural aspects. Once he completed the plan, that might have been the end of it. But Marc's style is to go above and beyond. He organized and directed the renovation. There was no budget for the project, so he raised the money to fund it. This was a great way to develop management skills, and a great experience in complex problem-solving."

The physical work, following Marc's carefully detailed plan, began in the fall of 2002. The workers and advisors represented many areas of campus: the Landscaping Crew, Garden Crew, Natural Resources Crew, former Garden Manager Donna Price, Dean of Work Ian Robertson, and a host of volunteers. The crews and volunteers cleared away the dead trees and debris, treated the healthy trees with Surround, a pest deterrent product, and planted 50 new trees, all disease-resistant. A year later, the Garden Crew was able to press apples for cider, a byproduct that Marc feels is ideal for organically grown apples because, he says, "You don't have to be as beautiful." Now managed by the Garden Crew, the orchard is once again a valued component of the College food system. "Restoring the orchard," Marc says, "was a lofty goal, but many people helped me achieve it."

Dr. Lengnick says, "Everything Marc did here was, in a sense, community-building. When community forms around you, it is easier to meet your goals."

Feeding the mind: the Garden, the Cowpie Café, lessons that live on

Although Marc puts the orchard renovation at the top of his accomplishments at Warren Wilson, there are other contenders for first place. While work on the orchard continued, he was also putting in many hours each week as a member of the Garden Crew and as a regular food preparer at the student-initiated Cowpie Café. He was the first resident director of the EcoDorm, a Student Trustee of the Warren Wilson Board, a student representative on the Governance Review Committee, and a volunteer for local organizations including the Master Gardeners of Buncombe County and the Long Branch Environmental Center. "I just didn't sleep," he says.

His work was varied, but food was almost always at its center. He gravitated naturally to the Garden and the Café, since, he says, "I have been farming and feeding my whole life." He came to Warren Wilson with experience in sustainable agriculture--locally, at High Valley Farms in Tuckasegee--and in Holland, his mother's homeland, as a participant in the Willing Workers on Organic Farms project. He had also worked in restaurants, chiefly vegetarian, including Asheville's Laughing Seed, where one of his specialties was formulating soups.

In the spring of 2003, Marc embarked on an independent study of the economic viability of purchasing more organic food for the College food

service. Using GIS maps he had previously produced for the Garden (he also had created maps for the Farm and the orchard) and churning out acres of spreadsheets, Marc researched and addressed questions such as "How much can each vegetable grown by the Garden be expected to produce for a given amount of space?"

Using Marc's study as part of its push to increase production, the Garden now provides greens for the Gladfelter cafeteria and hundreds of pounds of squash, potatoes, tomatoes, and other vegetables for Cowpie, the first buy-local vegetarian café operated by Sodexo--a model for other colleges that employ the giant food service provider. Marc's work at Cowpie was manual as well as mental. After performing a cost analysis and discovering that it was cheaper for the café to make some of its own products, he was up to his elbows in granola, hot sauce and salsa.

Marc's skill with food began with childhood experiments. Growing up in Florida with his father, he says he was "the domestic in the house. I had to do it, but I liked doing it, too." One year while in middle school, at the annual evening to showcase student talent, Marc decided that his project would be a chocolate cake. He "just opened Betty Crocker" and everything went well until he got to the frosting. "There were big yellow chunks sticking out. I didn't realize you were supposed to melt the butter first."

Early disasters were learning opportunities. By now, Marc, 29, is sharing his knowledge with others. In the spring of 2002, he was an organizer of the "Field to Fork" program, which brought speakers on food topics to the campus. In March, 2004, he taught a class at the

Flat Rock Organic Gardeners School titled Spring Sprouts and Wild Greens: Do It Yourself Seasonal Cuisine. Marc recalls, "I harvested 30 different types of plants, most of them wild--dandelions, violet flowers and leaves, bitter cress, and chickweed. Chickweed makes wonderful pesto." The class was quickly filled.

More recently, he prepared food provided by Leicester farmer Tom Elmore at one of Laura Lengnick's Sustainable Suppers. After the supper, which was held in the Garden Cabin, Marc and Tom Elmore joined Dr. Lengnick and students in a discussion that began with "the ideal sustainable agriculture program" and evolved into suggestions for closing the loop of sustainability at Warren Wilson. Along the way, one of the concerns expressed was the necessity of "reinventing the wheel every time someone graduates."

Marc embodies the effort to create continuity at the College. Dr. Lengnick says, "Marc is so intentional. He understands that our community--with all its richness and diversity--is changing constantly. Knowledge and experience leave as students leave." In the case of the orchard, she says, "Marc didn't just go out and find a booklet on how to use Serenade on a particular insect--he created treatment timelines, management guidelines, and he did similar documentation for food systems. He wanted to leave behind a 'book' that the next person could grab, with the basic problems already figured out. He wanted to inspire people to pick up where he'd left off--and run with it."

Championing green spaces inside and out: the EcoDorm

In the Sunday, March 28, 2004, edition of *The Charlotte Observer*, a head-shot of Marc Williams fills the front page of its Living section.⁴ He is, typically, smiling, looking not at the camera but at sunlight streaming through the window of the EcoDorm's first-floor living room. He is quoted as saying, "Everybody who comes in here is just blown away." During the year he was resident director and frequent tour guide, he watched visitors marvel at the photovoltaic awnings, the concrete floors with hydromatic heat, the composting toilets, and the mechanical room with a collection of pipes, levers, valves, and blinking lights that has the steely drama of a spaceship.

And outside, from a brown bed of post-construction mud, a permaculture garden sends up tentative sprouts. ⁵ Over the entrance pergola, a grapevine provides shade in summer and, bare of leaves, allows sunlight through in winter. When complete, there will be 64 varieties of herbs and vegetables, a half-dozen kinds of fruit trees and berries, and several types of vines. All of the plantings will be wildlife-friendly, and most of them will be edible. Which, in the view of *The New York Times*, was "the best feature of all for students hit with sudden hunger pangs."

Marc is proud of those headline-grabbing features, but he also recalls the realities. "It was a learning experience for everybody. There was no storage inside the dorm, there were problems in getting composting toilets certified, and the heat failed to function for a while. The students were super-accepting about it. They understood that living in the EcoDorm was not going to be a cushy situation." There is no air conditioning in the EcoDorm; hair dryers, mini-refrigerators and toasters aren't allowed; televisions, synthetic rugs, and halogen lights

are discouraged. The residents bought into that. Marc says, "There was esprit de corps from the very beginning."

The point is food and community

On a recent evening at Papa's Restaurant, as the mountainside fades from reds and yellows to deep-in-the-country black, Marc Williams shifts gears. This will not be an ordinary night of serving "healthy home cooking," but another in a series of events presented by the second prong of his enterprise, Natural Harvest Foods. Marc feels that "festivals focused around food have always been important to the survival of different cultures and societies." The festival tonight is a "Journey to Japan," which Marc and his partners have subtitled "A night of good food, art, entertainment and people."

Guests arrive to tables piled high with sushi, tempura, tofu teriyaki, chicken yakitori, wilted greens--and a few surprises, such as Forbidden Rice Pudding, a dessert that does look darkly intimidating, but is proclaimed delicious nonetheless. The food has come from Warren Wilson (putting to particular good use the shitaki mushrooms grown by the Natural Resources Crew) and local farms. One of these farms is Hickory Nut Gap/Spring House Natural Meats, owned by Wilson alums Jamie and Amy Ager. "They are my heroes," says Marc. "I have a picture of Jamie up on my wall for inspiration, and I wish I had one of Amy."

Marc is the hero of this evening. At its conclusion, he thanks everyone who came (including a large Warren Wilson contingent led by Doug and Darcy Orr) and finds himself surrounded by well-wishers. Most of them are aware that, despite the exotic largesse of this "Journey to

Japan," Marc continues to live the simple life.

Laura Lengnick sums it up: "By living sustainably, Marc is building great social capital. People want to help him, and part of our motivation--our inspiration--is that we are helping ourselves. We say, 'If he can do this, we can do this.' He is living a life of integrity, authenticity. In a culture that suffers from 'affluenza,' Marc gives us hope."

About the Author

Elizabeth Lutyens is freelance journalist and a 1999 graduate of the MFA in Creative Writing Program at Warren Wilson College. A current project is work with the Environmental Leadership Center to produce a "Primer" for its Green Walkabout program.