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GREEN MOUNTAIN

I believe: 'Education plays an essential role in transforming society'



RYAN MERCER, Free Press

This week's "I Believe" essayist, Megan Camp (center) with her fellow educators (from left) Sarah Kadden, Jen Cirillo and Tiffany Tillman, operate Shelburne Farm's Sustainable Schools Project.

BY MEGAN CAMP • SUNDAY, AUGUST 29, 2010

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One day last week I walked up the steps of the new home of the Sustainability Academy at Lawrence Barnes on North Street in Burlington. The final days of summer were fading, and the beginning of another school year was in the air.

I opened the door and expected to experience the familiar setting of a school getting ready to welcome students back for the fall. Stepping into the hallway, there were signs welcoming community members to the Sustainability Academy, and I was quickly reminded of the far-from-ordinary work of this school.

For decades, I dreamed a school like this would exist. Thirty years ago I packed my trunk and headed to the Green Mountains to enroll as a student at the University of Vermont. I had selected UVM because of its nationally recognized and innovative environmental-studies program. Undergraduate students enrolled in the program were responsible for designing their own curriculum and majors. Like many idealistic youth at the time, I had grown up in the civil-rights movement

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of the '60s, experienced the power of the first Earth Day and felt a civic responsibility for "saving the planet" in some big way.

I now realize my professional aspirations and beliefs are rooted deeply in my parents' lifelong commitment to education and social justice. My father brought his young family to Washington, D.C., in 1965 when he enrolled in President Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty." He worked for the new Office of Economic Opportunity, developing a program called Upward Bound, which sought to provide educational opportunity for all Americans regardless of race, ethnic background or economic circumstances. In response to mandated school bussing, my mother founded a community-based organization that helped cultivate relationships and friendships between newly "integrated" students and families through after-school, weekend and summer programming.

For a short time before college I was attracted to the idea of becoming an environmental lawyer creating new regulations and policies or working in international development to alleviate poverty around the world, but I also knew deep down that education played an essential role in transforming society. So I spent my four college years focused on a major in environmental education and a thesis titled "Creating a New Paradigm for Education."

After graduating from UVM and going to work at Shelburne Farms, I had the opportunity to be part of a network of individuals and organizations dedicated to improving our educational system. In the 1990s, Shelburne Farms was one a dozen nonprofit organizations and state agencies engaged in a grassroots participatory process designed to ask: "What do students in Vermont need to know and be able to do to live sustainably in the 21st century?" As a result Vermont was the first state in the nation to incorporate a set of sustainability standards in the state framework of standards. As Tom Slayton testified to the Vermont Board of Education, "Sustainability is just a newfangled word for an old Vermont tradition."

In August 2008, the Burlington School Board voted to create the state's first two magnet schools and to make one of those schools, Lawrence Barnes Elementary, into the nation's first K-5 magnet school with a sustainability theme. The School Board's plan for magnet schools was the result of four years of research conducted by, and with, more than 1,000 Burlington residents, parents, teachers, administrators, education professors and community activists. The magnet schools were an important part of the socioeconomic integration goals for the district.

Sustainability — the shared responsibility for improving quality of life for all, economically, socially and environmentally, now and for future generations — is being integrated into the curriculum, campus practices and culture at Lawrence Barnes. The academy has become an incubator of exciting work where teachers and students explore the connections between our community, economy and environment. Teachers report that students are more motivated to learn, because they are engaged and invested in their community.

Students at the academy experience the big ideas of sustainability every day. The kindergarten students explore their community, meet community helpers and become community helpers themselves. First-graders learn about food and nutrition by visiting local farms, composting in the cafeteria and making healthy food choices from the meals served from locally sourced products. Second- and third-graders learn about human, natural and social systems. Fourth- and fifth-graders develop quality-of-life indicators for their neighborhoods, create community report cards and design projects to improve their community.

Student-led initiatives have included creating a community art show, calming traffic, creating safe play areas and designing and building a school garden.

Teachers in all kinds of communities throughout the world report again and again that students "feel disconnected" and "have no hope." Indeed, many of our youth have a deep, intuitive sense of the disastrous direction in which we are headed. A recent Gallup Poll found that 70 percent of 16-24-year-olds believe the world was a better place when their parents were their age — and more than half are convinced it will be worse for their own children.

Yet schools such as the Sustainability Academy are good reason for hope. Education for



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sustainability has a central role to play in advancing the social, economic and ecological literacy of our young people. It plays a vital role in cultivating a sense of place and purpose. Our schools need to prepare students to envision solutions to our current crisis of unsustainability. They can do that by giving youth the knowledge, skills and the "habits of mind and heart" that will enable them to create a sustainable future.

"... The limits are real and close, and ... there is just exactly enough time, with no time to waste. There is just exactly enough energy, enough material, enough money, enough environmental resilience and enough human virtue to bring about a revolution of a better world."

— Donella Meadows, *Beyond the Limits*

Megan Camp joined the staff at Shelburne Farms, a 1,400-acre farm and forest, in 1983 and works as vice president and program director. Contact Megan Camp at 985-8686 or mcamp@shelburnefarms.org.

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