Urban Farmers oversees growing produce collection efforts in Contra Costa

By Lou Fancher Correspondent Contra Costa Times

LAFAYETTE -- What began as a gleam in the eye of Siamack Sioshansi, founder of The Urban Farmers, has become a growing groundswell of East Bay gleaners.

From students at Danville's Athenian School to a cadre of fresh produce pickers at Temple Isaiah and Savior's Lutheran Church in Lafayette to future food justice fighters at Contra Costa County's Monument Crisis Center in Concord, Loaves and Fishes, Diablo Valley College and various Kiwanis clubs to a coalition at Moraga's Saint Mary's College, an ancient tradition has become more than a trend in the East Bay.

Sioshansi, helping shepherd the massive militia, is looking forward to the day when agile harvesting organizations sprinkle the East Bay like so many Johnny Appleseeds and he can "turn off the light and turn in the keys." He envisions the area's steady supply of excess produce being gathered and delivered to those in need on a big scale. He imagines the nonprofit he began in his backyard a half dozen years ago mentoring, not motoring, the harvest.

"In order to build a hunger-proof county, we need a 21st century civic production 'factory' where a lot of high-quality goods are produced at very low costs," he says. "If our costs of producing food (are) higher than the cost of buying the same food, then the best thing we can do is donate the money to the hunger relief agencies."

But large, centrally controlled relief organizations quickly become bureaucratic and "muscle bound," he complains. Eager, active volunteers are pushed into inflexible, procedural corners and administrative or materials expenses eat up resources meant to feed the hungry. Remaining nimble usually requires staying small -- which means solutions are slow to arrive and impact is minimal.

So how, in light of such a blueprint, is Urban Farmers increasing its footprint?

Increasingly, college students and K-12 youths are being enlisted by Sioshansi as next—gen gleaners. At Saint Mary’s College, he has been co-teaching a "Politics of Food and Hunger" course with Professor Patrizia Longo. Last semester, the class’s 20 students spent 32 hours harvesting fruit and working within the community on issues related to food and poverty.

"The long-term solution for many of our persistent problems rests on the shoulders of the next generation. Working with aware and engaged students is one of our best tools in changing a (food) system that delivers innocent victims," he says.

With a newly revised core curriculum in 2013, SMC is adding some heft to its culture and social justice academic center, the Catholic Institute for Lasallian Social Action. Beginning this fall, all students are required to complete courses with engagement and common good outcomes.

"(Social service) is being implemented across campuses," explains CILSA Community Engagement
Coordinator Ryan Lamberton. "Higher education is asking what students will learn by graduation. Will they learn compassion and civic activism?"

Two students, seniors Jordan Marvin and Mia Castro, will do that -- if they meet a challenge issued to them by Sioshansi.

"The best test of our model is to see if a group of motivated college students can create a standalone chapter of The Urban Farmers. I issued them that challenge," he says.

Lamberton says the gleaning model they create will be designed to be shared with learning institutions across the country. Marvin, as one of CILSA's 13 "Bonner Leaders," will bear supervisory responsibilities. Bonner Leaders are an elite group of students who meet minimum GPAs, commit to 300 community service hours over a year's time, create and sign a learning objectives agreement and participate in bimonthly project reviews. Although there is currently no extra credit earned, they are paid $10-12 per hour and receive a $1,200 Americorps Education Award upon the program's completion.

Sioshansi says the Saint Mary's students have recruitment plans for gleaners and fruit donors. Bill Snider, owner of Moraga Hardware, has donated vital equipment and supplies. Urban Farmers is sharing its registration system, although Sioshansi says, half-jokingly, the tech-savvy students can likely design a better one of their own.

Lamberton knows from personal experience that life's essential lessons can't be taught in the silo of a four-walled classroom.

"We're scaling up the Bonner Leader program continually, establishing more partnerships and discussing (going beyond) our current, mostly health-based categories into restorative criminal justice projects, arts and drama in underserved communities, and addressing environmental concerns."

On Aug. 28, Urban Farmers led Bonner Leaders on a harvest, introducing them to the responsibilities and goals of the Urban Farmers/Saint Mary's pilot project while gleaning fruit from two local gardens that the students will deliver to the Monument Crisis Center. A "Saturday of Service" on Aug. 31 will be open to all students; carrying them to gardens and urban parks in the Bay Area and moving Sioshansi one step closer to "lights out, keys up, your turn to carry on."

Urban Farmers
Urban Farmers is looking both for more gleaning volunteers and more fruit trees from which to glean. If you're interested, go to:

- Website: [www.theurbanfarmers.org](http://www.theurbanfarmers.org)
- Phone: 925-297-5525
- Address: 1035 Carol Lane, Lafayette, CA 94549
- Facebook: [https://www.facebook.com/theurbanfarmers.org](https://www.facebook.com/theurbanfarmers.org)