

Going for the green

Andrews instructor promotes healthy eating, healthy environments

By JOHN MATUSZAK
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BERRIEN SPRINGS — Garth Woodruff knows there are many ways in which people can be starved for things that are green and growing.

One is through their bodies, when they don't have access to affordable fresh food.

Another is in their souls, if they are not in touch with the beauty of nature.

As a horticulture and landscape design instructor at Andrews University in charge of the student garden, and as co-owner with his wife, Lani, of their own landscape design firm, RootBound, Woodruff tries to fill both of those gaps.

"We're feeding the stomach and feeding the soul," Woodruff said of the acres of fruits and vegetables, herbs and even flowers nurtured and sold through the student garden, orchards and greenhouses.

This year, in partnership with Be Healthy Berrien, Andrews is operating a mobile farm market, bringing produce to low-income neighborhoods where fresh food is not readily available.

Woodruff said it's a travesty that most of what is grown around here is shipped out and there are "food deserts" where people can't get healthy produce.

"That's a strange dynamic, that needs to be flipped over," Woodruff said.

While he did some gardening and weeding as a kid on 5 acres tilled by his "gentleman farmer" father, Woodruff's roots weren't really in the soil.

While attending the University of Maryland, the mediocre student took horticulture courses "and I was really eating it up," suddenly earning A's.

When he told his mother about his new career interest she said "I think that's really a hobby," Woodruff recalled. "No parent tells their kid

"Why don't you go to school and learn to be a farmer?"

But Woodruff followed his bliss and completed his degree in horticulture and landscape design at Andrews University in 1996. While completing his degree, he started his own firm, Second Nature, and moved it to Virginia, operating there for 17 years.

He returned to Andrews three years ago to teach and to run the student garden program.

The opportunity put him on the cutting edge of the growing local food movement.

The student farm grows produce that is sold at a nearby stand and is delivered to customers' doors through a Consumer-Supported Agriculture enterprise, in which subscribers sign up for a portion of each year's yield.

Last year, the Andrews garden produced about 30 tons of produce, not counting its apple crop.

Part of the mission of the operation is to educate residents about the health benefits of eating fresh food.

Woodruff has seen that work in his own life. After he went vegetarian, he lost weight, his cholesterol count fell dramatically in a short time, and his blood pressure returned to normal.

Woodruff, his wife and sons — Foster, a student at St. Joseph High School, and Hudson, who attends Upton Middle School — all maintain active lifestyles.

Garth and Lani run, bike and swim. The boys run track and cross country.

Growing your own food is also a money-saver, especially with two hungry boys to feed, Woodruff said.

"Growing your own food is like printing your own money," he said, quoting another food expert.

Woodruff also is an avid sailor and belongs to the St. Joseph Yacht Club.

As well as benefiting the lo-

cal community, the Andrews agricultural program has an international component. It rents plots to students from other countries who want to grow some of their own food.

The agriculture department fields calls from African nations and impoverished places such as Haiti, where people want instruction on how to grow food, Woodruff said.

The department supported an orphanage in Africa that started its own farm and now sells its wares. Andrews students travel to Jordan to practice agricultural techniques and water conservation.

In addition to overseeing the garden and its retail outlets, Woodruff teaches a full course load.

He admits that, with a busy schedule, it's not always easy to eat right.

But he said the cafeteria at Andrews helps him maintain his healthful diet with a variety of vegetarian meals.

Lani, his high school sweetheart and wife of 19 years, is a "food aficionado and a great cook," he said.

And through the horticulture programs at Andrews and his own business, Woodruff makes the world a little greener.

"It's about connecting people to nature," Woodruff said. "We have moved more indoors. Our goal is moving people outdoors."

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