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F O S T E R I N G I D E A L I S M i n E D U C A T I O N , M E D I C I N E a n d L A W

FALL 2011 ■ VOLUME 8 ■ NUMBER 2

A Love Story

There aren't many perks in this job. But there is one, and I wouldn't trade it for all the advantages that a more conventional job might offer. Our one great perk is to get up every morning and take a front row center seat to watch the transformative power of love at work.

Many think that "the transformative power of love" is a corny cliché outside of the bounds of one's immediate family. But I think that's probably because they don't get a chance to see it much. Today we are rushed, stressed, and constantly bombarded by a weird modern mix of marketing, tragedy, trivia and glamour, none of which have much if anything to do with love. But the power of love is the one thing in this life that I would swear was real. Indeed, I'm not sure anything else is.

We call it mentoring because that's the social science term for an adult befriending a child. Social scientists say it is the most beneficial intervention that can be done in the life of an at-risk young person. But, corny as it sounds, the reason that mentoring is so effective is because it harnesses the power of relationship, which is simply love.

This particular love story began eight years ago when Ann and Terry Brutocao, a recently retired couple, were looking for something to do together. They saw an item we had placed in the bulletin of Our Lady of the Assumption Church, which donates office space to us. The item requested mentors for our Connect to College program. We matched the couple with [continued on page 2]



Photo by Brutocao Family

Mentors Terry and Ann Brutocao with their mentees, Jessica and Edgar, touring the official airplane of the President of the United States, Air Force One.

We Are Farming!

It was the summer of 2009 and most of the families in our education program were struggling through the Great Recession. Fires were raging in the hills above Los Angeles County and the air was hot and thick with ash. Local landlords began renting out unventilated metal storage containers to desperate families in need of housing, families so desperate that they would move into what for all practical purposes was a solar oven. Other families were emigrating back to their home countries which they had fled because they were starving. But now they were starving here far away from their loved ones and so figured that they might as well starve at home. Try as we might, we couldn't provide enough social services to the



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Collaborators in our urban agriculture project: Carlos Carrillos of Uncommon Good, Miguel Bonilla of the Urban Farmers Association, and Randy Bekendam of Amy's Farm.

families who remained to keep them adequately fed and housed.

As we tried to come up with new ways to help our families, one idea was to give them plots in a local community garden so that they could grow some of their own food. After all, many of the parents in our program were displaced farmers. After our government passed the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1992, for each ton of grain that we exported to Mexico, another peasant was driven off of his or her land and immigrated to the United States.

Yet when we suggested community gardening to the parents, they vetoed the idea. After working long hours performing manual labor, they did not have the energy to come home and tackle more manual labor. What little strength and time they had left they needed to devote to their homes and families.

However, I realized that not only were our parents farmers, but they were dry land, organic farmers, because that is how they had farmed in their home countries. There they had not had expensive irrigation systems, or petroleum based fertilizers or pesticides. Furthermore, we are located on the border of Los Angeles County, which has 10 million people, no farms and a growing demand for locally grown organic produce, and San Bernardino County, which is the largest county in the nation and the fourth most obese county in the nation, largely because of lack of access to healthy food. We also are in close proximity to Orange and Riverside Counties.

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Photo by Brutocao Family

Picking lemons for lemonade, May 2004.

a brother and sister, ten -year-old Edgar and eleven -year-old Jessica, who lived in a tiny trailer in the City of Pomona with their little sister and their mother who was a receptionist at a local burger joint.

Ann remembers her first meeting with the children. Jessica was a gregarious, take-charge young lady. Edgar was quiet, intense, and intellectually curious. "Jessica talked our ears off. Edgar was full of questions, but if you asked him anything, you'd get a one syllable answer," Ann recalls.

Ann and Terry and the children began spending time together at the Brutocao home, doing the little things that form the foundation of a friendship with a child. They picked lemons off the backyard tree and made lemonade, swam in the pool, barbecued ribs, played with the dog and baked cookies. The adults taught the children some basics, such as how to say "thank you," how to play tennis, and that perennial kid favorite: the card game UNO.

They also had learning adventures together. "We got to do things we otherwise never would have done," reports Ann. "We went to museums, libraries, the Queen Mary. When we would go to a museum, Edgar would read every line of every description under every single exhibit! When we went to modern art shows, the children tried very hard to look interested," she laughed.

The example set by Ann and Terry and the educational experiences that they gave the children had the desired effect. Their mother reported that she no longer had to nag Edgar to apply himself to his homework. "He wants to get good grades so he can have a nice home like the Brutocaos," she told us.

As the children grew older, new parts of their personalities emerged. By the time he was in middle school, Edgar refused to smile. Jessica would tease him about it and tickle him to try to force a smile out of him. In eighth grade, he asked for an American flag for his birthday. The Brutocaos gave him one and he put it up on the wall at home. "When he was a freshman in high school," remembers Ann, "he was still very quiet. But one day he announced that he was going to be the president of the student body. I thought, 'Oh, really?'"

Edgar made good on his promise and graduated this year as student body president, giving a great speech that generated much applause. A few years ago he made another pronouncement to a group of parents in our program. "I am going to be the Mayor of Pomona," he announced. They responded with a standing ovation for their home town son. Knowing Edgar, this is no idle boast. Currently, he is on a full scholarship, transportation and living costs included, at the College of the Holy Cross, a highly selective, leading liberal arts four-year college in Massachusetts. Alumnae include a number of U.S. Congressmen, a Supreme Court Justice, and the speech writer for President Obama. Edgar chose the school for its proximity to Washington D.C. and the corridors of political power.

Jessica also applied herself to school. "I remember when she had a science fair assignment," Ann told us. "She worked so hard on it and then carried it over to our house to practice her presentation. I knew then that she would be a leader. She became a cheerleader in high school, but found that she hated it. She then became the Rally Chairman for the school and she really enjoyed that because she was in charge!"

Jessica is now a student at UC Monterey Bay, majoring in business, and is working and paying her own rent in her own apartment. "Jessica was so special because I didn't have any girls before that," said Ann, the mother of four boys.



Photo by Brutocao Family

Jessica rehearsing her science fair presentation, 2004.



Photo by Brutocao Family

Edgar with Colby, the Brutocao family dog, 2004.



Photo by Brutocao Family

Visiting the Queen Mary, 2005.

"We did all the things with Jessica and Edgar that we would have liked to do with our own grandchildren but can't because they are not around," she added. "They are like a part of our family. I was almost in tears at the end of Edgar's graduation, thinking of the bond we have with them and sadness at their leaving. I wonder if they feel it, too."

Even though Jessica and Edgar have gone away to college, they plan to stay in touch with Ann and Terry. Recently Jessica emailed them to say she missed them and to share her excitement about her college experience. "We feel like we achieved our goal as mentors," Terry told me. "We got them interested in college and in good schools, with Edgar even getting a full scholarship." "It was definitely a highlight of our married life," concludes Ann.

I can only add that seeing Jessica and Edgar blossom under the loving attention of Ann and Terry Brutocao, mentors extraordinaire, has been a highlight of my life as well. 📌

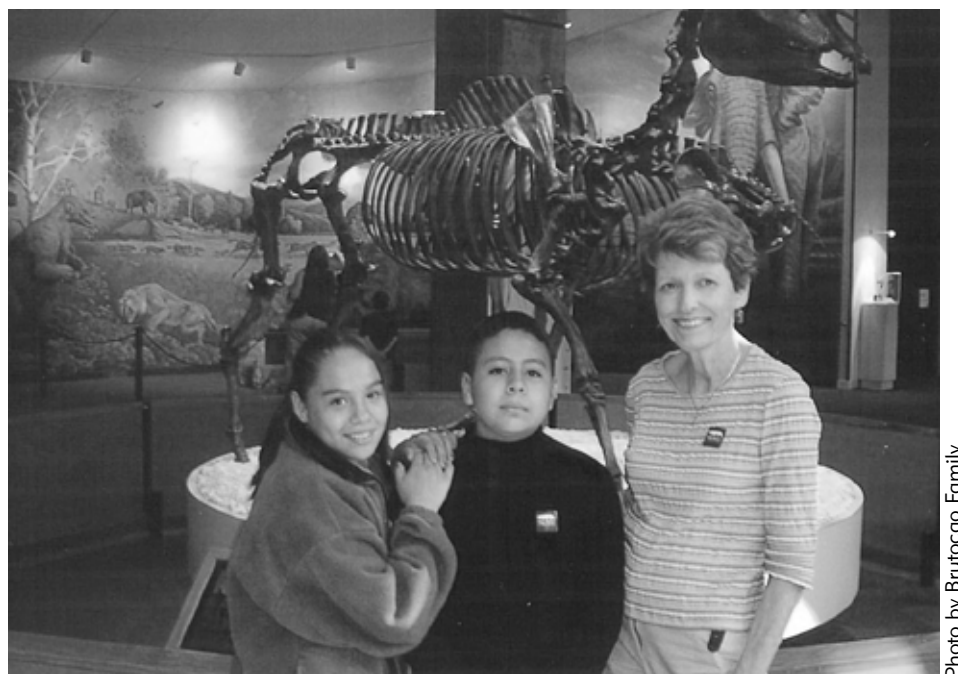


Photo by Brutocao Family

Visiting the La Brea Tar Pits, 2006.



Photo by Brutocao Family

Christmas 2008.



Photo by Brutocao Family

Christmas 2008.

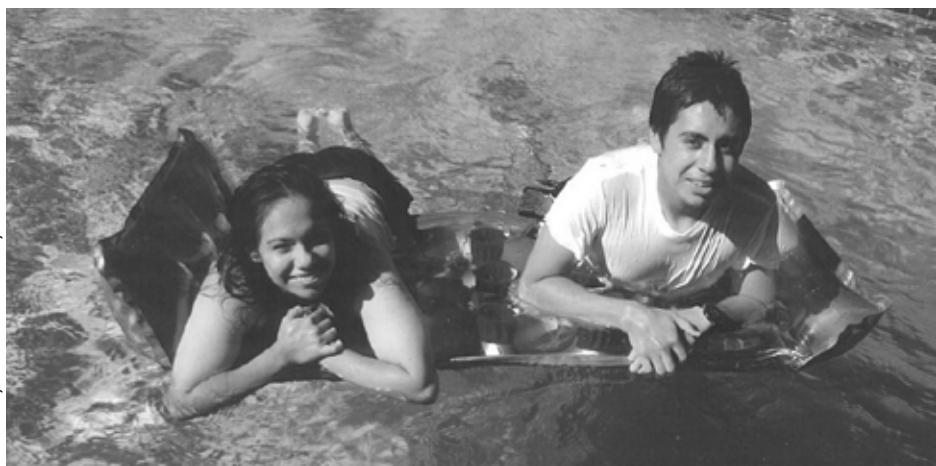


Photo by Brutocao Family

Enjoying the Brutocao swimmin pool, 2010.



Photo by Brutocao Family

Baking Christmas cookies, 2010.

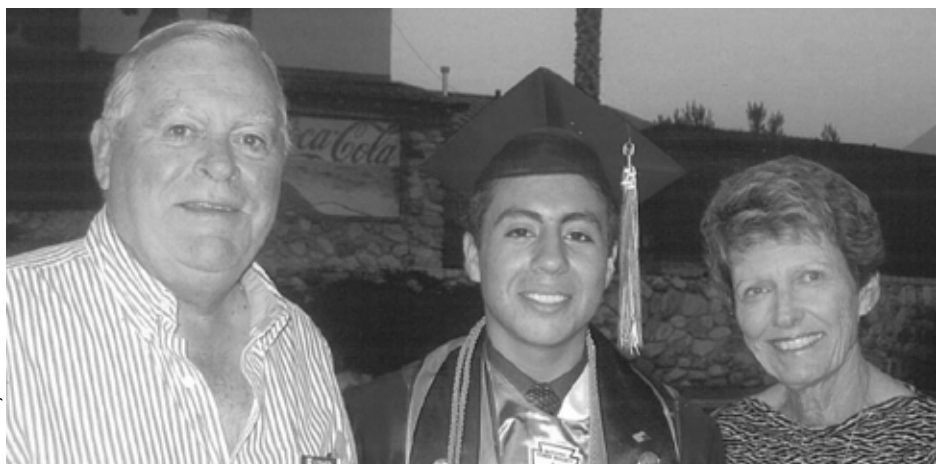


Photo by Carlos Carrillo

Edgar's high school graduation, 2011.

The California Wellness Foundation and California Community Foundation Give Major Grants

Uncommon Good has been awarded two major grants for its MED Relief (Medical Education Debt Relief) program. Formerly known as Adopt an Angel, this program helps young doctors, dentists and pharmacists who devote their careers to working for the poor in community clinics. MED Relief provides them with funds to repay their sky high student loans so that they can work in the lowest paying jobs in the medical profession serving the poor.

The California Wellness Foundation has given the program a two-year \$200,000 grant for the program. The Robert C. Fraser Fund of the California Community Foundation has provided a one-year \$186,608.20 grant. We are delighted and privileged to be able to distribute these funds to the compassionate physicians, dentists and pharmacists who make medical available to the thousands of underprivileged people throughout Los Angeles and San Bernardino counties who have no other source of health care. ☑



Photo by Nancy Mintie

The California Community Foundation honored 9 of our MED Relief doctors who receive loan repayment assistance through the foundation's Robert C. Fraser Fund on November 9, 2011. Pictured are Estrellita Azimi of the Robert C. Fraser Scholarship Committee, Joy Jackson of Mission City Community Network, Elizabeth Ford of the Eisner Pediatric and Family Medical Center, Rebecca Deans of the Saban Free Clinic, Charles Huynh of the Jeffrey Goodman Clinic, Xochitl Jackson also of the Eisner Center, Coley King of the Venice Family Clinic, Jaime Lara of the Universal Community Health Center, Lucila Tarin of UMMA Community Clinic, and Althea Stresino of Northeast Valley Health Corporation.

We Are Creating Jobs

In response to the Great Recession and the hardships it brought to our client community, Uncommon Good formed a coalition that successfully competed for almost a million dollars in federal stimulus funds for green job training. That was fine as far as it went, but the government then inexplicably failed to fund the creation of those green jobs. Those who had gotten their hopes up and participated in the training were justifiably angry and disappointed.

Some hoped that the economy would recover and start producing jobs. Yet this, too, failed to happen. Our office is on the border between Los Angeles and San Bernardino counties. Unemployment is 14% in San Bernardino County. In some surrounding cities, over a third of the population lives below the federal poverty line, which is set at an artificially and unreasonably low level. For instance, the poverty level for a family of three is \$18,530 in a region in which rent alone will cost that much. A growing number of children of these families don't eat at all when they go home from school.

Faced with these harsh realities, we could not rest. Our Development Director, Michael Peel, has invested thousands of hours into building new job creation coalitions with local cities, educational institutions, faith communities and contractors through our Building Block program. The goal of this program is to build a new job infrastructure across the region to begin to replace those industries that died in the recession. Our farm is one such project. Others include model energy audit and retrofitting programs. In addition, we have been pleased to be able to employ a local workforce in the construction of our new Superadobe office, Greenspace.

In addition to creating work opportunities, Michael has been structuring apprenticeships for those workers who have received classroom training but who have limited or no on-the-job experience. These apprenticeships are designed to give our clients a competitive edge over other applicants for the jobs that do exist in this tough economy.

We have been recognized for these efforts by being chosen by the California Energy Commission as an Energy Champion through the Energy Upgrade California program. Through this program, homeowners receive up to \$8,000 in rebates for making energy efficiency improvements to their homes. If they mention Uncommon Good as a referring agency, we receive a \$500 stipend. If you are contemplating an energy upgrade for your home or appliances, and are interested in the program, visit our website at www.uncommongood.org and see Building Blocks Job News for more information. 📄



Photo by Robert Olson



Photo by Robert Olson



Photo by Chelsea Fried



Photo by Chelsea Fried



Photo by Robert Olson



Photo by Nancy Mintie



Photo by Nancy Mintie



Photo by Nancy Mintie



Photo by Nancy Mintie



Photo by Nancy Mintie

We Are Farming (con't)

[continued from page 1]



Photo by Carlos Carrillo

Our Urban Farmers Association.

It seemed to me that if we could put our farmers to work, we could create a regional industry that would provide new jobs, produce a healthy product, lower the carbon footprint of our local food supply, and increase our communities' food security.

So we called a meeting of our farmer parents and asked them, "If you could make a decent wage and support your family through farming, would you be interested in doing that?" The room exploded with enthusiasm, excitement and ideas. The discussion went on for hours into the night. It was beautiful to see the deep passion that our parents have for the earth, for nurturing growing things, and for the art and science of growing healthy food. For them, farming was not a job but a calling and a vocation. Out of that meeting, the group formed the Urban Farmers Association, and they began to plan with us how we would bring urban agriculture to our region. The result was our Pomona Valley Urban Agriculture Initiative (PVUAI).

Others in the community joined the PVUAI effort. The Drucker School of Management at Claremont Graduate University studied business models and markets with us, assisted by students from Pomona College and Cal Poly Pomona. A Pomona College student, Sam Hanft, with the help of his fellow students,

conducted a Food Assessment Survey of the low-income population of Pomona. The results of the study were sobering. 65% were found to be suffering from food insecurity and 28% from moderate or severe hunger. It was heartbreaking to read the comments of mothers from the focus groups in which they described the stress, anxiety and depression that resulted from their struggles to feed their families. One mother told us:

"We live day by day...we lived just to pay the rent, until we decided to give up our home. There are many people like us who spend all of our incomes on big costs, like rent, with nothing left over for food, or the doctor, the dentist, anything."

Another explained:

"We have to keep waiting for sales (of fruits and vegetables) because it's the only way to get by right now. And while you wait for the sales, you make beans."

So I searched for grant sources that could provide start-up capital for a farm. As a nonprofit organization without any property we could not qualify for loans and neither could our low-income farmers, who also lacked collateral. Neither could we attract investors because we were determined to pay fair wages and benefits, which would shrink our profit margins and make us unattractive compared to other investment opportunities.

I examined all of the funding offered by the USDA. Almost all of it was designated for subsidies for corporate agriculture, or for support for the professional consultant class of researchers, trainers and support centers, none of which we needed. Even the highly touted but misleadingly named "Beginning Farmers and Ranchers Act" did not provide funding for beginning farmers or for farmers whose experience was in Latin America and could not be verified with written documents that our government would consider credible.

I finally found one little hidden gem in the USDA array of programs. The Community Food Projects program provided one-time grants of up to \$300,000 for three years for projects that would increase the availability of healthy food in low-income communities. However, even \$300,000 would not be enough to secure land in Southern California, build the infrastructure for a farm, and pay farmers decently until their work began to turn a profit.

At this point we recruited another partner, Pomona resident Randy Bekendam, whose life had been changed by a community tragedy in 2006. On November 19th of that year, three-year-old Ethan Esparza, whose birthday was



Getting ready for the farm pumpkin sale.

Photo by Nancy Mintie



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Miguel Bonilla, the first full time farmer hired for our PEACH program (Pomona Enterprise for Agriculture, Community & Health).



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Carlos Carrillo and Miguel Bonilla with the reartine rototiller.

the next day, was celebrating with his family on the lawn of his grandparents' home in Pomona. Without warning, shots were fired from a passing car. Ethan was struck and died in his mother's arms. Randy was badly shaken by this vicious and senseless killing in his own town, especially since he had a little grandson who was turning four-years-old on the same day that Ethan would have if he had lived.

At that time Randy was operating a family cattle farm and educational tour business named Amy's Farm in honor of his daughter. But after Ethan's murder, he wanted to do something to heal his community and thought that a community fruit and vegetable garden would be a way to start. The local mental health agency, Tri-City Mental Health Services, gave him a plot of land next to its

office for this purpose.

"On February 1, 2008, I planted the first seed of my life at fifty-five-years-old," he said. "But then I realized that if I wanted to bring the healing benefits of urban farming to the community, I needed to really learn how to farm myself. And the Tri-City plot wasn't big enough. So we started growing vegetables on the 9 acres at Amy's Farm. I studied what is known as 'small plot intensive farming' and began to learn how to be a farmer."

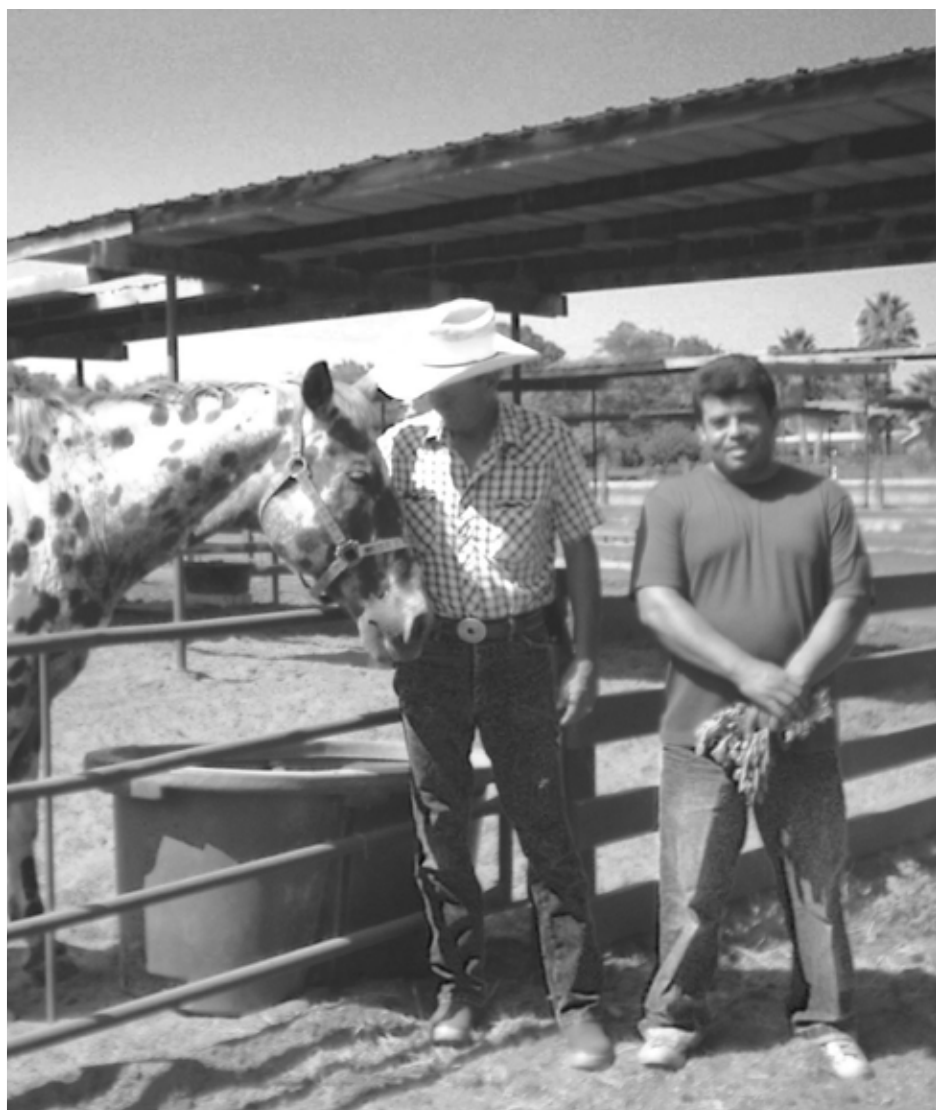
Randy hired two young people to farm with him, but they were unable to produce enough food to generate enough money to keep making payroll. He then tried to operate using volunteers, which also did not prove to be a satisfactory business model. We approached Randy with this proposition: we would provide the farmers, real farmers from our Urban Farmers Association, and the money to pay them and to cover the farm's infrastructure costs until it could produce enough income to stand on its own. In turn, Randy would provide the land and farm infrastructure. He agreed.

Our farm project, PEACH (Pomona Enterprise for Agriculture, Community & Health) was launched this fall with the USDA grant, supplemented by a grant from Trinity United Methodist Church in Pomona. Our first Urban Farmers Association farmer to be hired, Luis Salvin, had just lost his former job as a truck driver. After Luis had worked on the farm for a month, we heard from his wife. "My husband is a new man!" she told us. "He's lost weight, he has energy, and he isn't depressed anymore!"

The second farmer hired, Miguel Bonilla, worked 14 hour days from the age of 10 to the age of 21 supervising his family's 12 acre farm in El Salvador while his father worked in a mine. Miguel's son recently graduated from our Connect to College program and now is in the joint UCLA-UC Riverside pre-med program.

Our PEACH fruits and vegetables are being sold at a farm stand on the site, at restaurants, and at the Pomona farmers market. Roughly half of the produce in any given week is not sold and so is donated to shelters and food banks, making fresh healthy food available to those who otherwise would not be able to afford it.

Our plan is that by the end of the grant period, PEACH will be producing enough income to continue as an independent business, paying our farmers well enough to allow them to support their families. We now are looking for funds to pay the start-up costs for a second farm. Since foundation grants usually are not large enough for this purpose, we are hoping to find a foundation that would be willing to launch our next farm venture with an investment or loan of "seed money." Our long term goal is to start a regional urban agriculture industry to revitalize our communities and replace the jobs that were lost in the recession. ■



Randy Bekendam and Urban Farmers Association farmer Luis Salvin.

Photo by Nancy Mintie