The Pitzer College 50th Anniversary
Engaged Faculty Collection:
Community Engagement and
Activist Scholarship

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The year of Pitzer College’s 50th anniversary also brought a comparatively modest celebration. April 5, 2014, marked the one-year anniversary of stable access to land for a community garden project and new nonprofit in Ontario, California, called Huerta del Valle. A jumpy castle, free food and drinks, dancers ranging from Aztec to Zumba, lots of speeches and a garden-shaped cake were celebratory fare for hundreds of community members, Pitzer College students and faculty, city employees, and even a city council member. For me, it was a landmark event. I had begun recruiting students in 2010 to begin food justice projects in Ontario. It wasn’t traditional community-based research. I was trying to recruit students for the Pitzer in Ontario program, which had been through more than its share of ups and downs. I knew food justice would attract students and might help to solidify the program’s enrollment. But how would it resonate with Ontario communities?

Four years later we had our answer. Forty-eight family-tended plots were bursting with produce, Pitzer students were painting the faces of dozens of garden kids, and we were celebrating our first year of land tenure. Huerta del Valle had become a vibrant community-led project.

Huerta del Valle’s success is inextricably tied to Pitzer’s history and dedication to local community engagement. Engaging students in change-oriented work and teaching them to apply theory to practice are the signature goals of the Pitzer in Ontario program. Pitzer in Ontario is a semester-long, immersion-style program in which students take three courses and apply their academic learning to a 150-hour internship over the course of a semester. It is designed to be a program of urban studies and community-based research. In attempting to enact this work, we realized early on that the Inland Empire has a relatively small number of nonprofits, and that most are not oriented toward social change but toward service.

At a certain point, I got tired of waiting around for more nonprofits to appear. It was fatiguing for students, fellow faculty and me to place students in service organizations, like proverbial square pegs. In 2010, I attempted to create projects from the ground up geared toward urban and environmental...
sustainability. We wound up with a bike co-op, the Wheelhouse, which now hosts over 100 mostly low-income cyclists per month, and the Huerta del Valle community garden (HdV). For the remainder of this essay, I share information about Huerta del Valle’s programs and goals and about the context of Inland Empire, as well as the significance of creating a new nonprofit in this neglected landscape.

The Most Toxic Zip Code in California

Huerta del Valle is situated in a neglected landscape on the west end of San Bernardino County. The Inland Empire has been recovering more slowly from the recession than coastal counties. In January 2013, the Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario metropolitan areas continued to lead the nation in both unemployment and foreclosures. On top of that, California’s Enviroscan data found the 91761 zip code where the garden sits to be the most toxic in California.

Part of the reason for this is that the major economic engine of Ontario is devoted to the movement of goods that do not benefit the communities that they move through. The pollution of trucks, trains and airplanes for the goods movement industry creates environmental hazards and impedes conditions for healthful living. Streets in Ontario are scaled to semis and tractor-trailers rather than for walking, biking or playing. Vacant single parcels to 100-acre swaths of empty land abound, yet communities have little to no access to them. Huerta del Valle members are working to promote conditions of health in the Inland Empire by building a sustainable community-based agriculture center.

HdV has taken inspiration from the US food justice movement and from global food sovereignty movements in Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa and Asia. We handed out a document outlining these principles at the anniversary event: these movements view food as a right, value food providers, localize food production and control, and work for culturally appropriate, environmentally holistic knowledge sets and practices.

As a community-driven nonprofit, Huerta del Valle is focused on social change from the ground up. The past decade has brought numerous efforts toward urban sustainability, many of which involve food production through community gardens, community-supported agriculture programs, urban farms, farmers markets and various cooperative models.

Core participants at the garden are residents of Ontario. Ninety percent of adult garden participants are Latino. The remainder is composed of white, black, or Asian Pacific Islander-identified people. The neighborhood surrounding Bon View Park is 80 to100% Latino, mostly families of three to six people and has a high poverty rate, with block groups ranging from $20,000 to $60,000 per year.

Additional demographic information on garden population:

- 80% Latino of Mexican decent
- 80% monolingual Spanish speakers
- Most immigrants to the United States
- Time in United States 10 to 25+ years
- Possibly 50% undocumented
- Most participants between 30 and 60 years of age
- Mix of low- to middle-income families
- Mixed occupational experiences, including agriculture, trucking and manual labor
- Most do not have college degrees; many do not have high school diplomas
- Majority lives within one mile of garden
- Spanish, English and Tongan spoken at garden, with Spanish most common
- Most drive to garden; some walk or bike

One family, the Soakai’s, are Asian Pacific Islanders of Tongan decent who make up the API population at the garden. They grow different crops, such as taro, yams, lemon grass and papaya. They speak Tongan and bring community members of all ages to the garden. So far, there seems to be minimal overlap of cultures, though there is strong potential for that work, if language barriers can be breached.

We argue that a different kind of non-profit is required to promote positive change in the Inland Empire. We have attempted to structure Huerta del Valle as a cutting-edge model of sustainability in a depressed area of urban/suburban sprawl, which in many ways presents more challenging problems than do denser urban cores because of how scattered populations become.

Being the Change: Huerta del Valle

Before delving into nonprofit development issues, I wanted to describe in a bit more detail program directions for Huerta del Valle. These programs and updates can be found on the following website: http://hdv-huertadelvalle.blogspot.com/
Huerta del Valle started in 2010 with gardens at two different sites. We had partnered with two different nonprofits, only to see relationships fall through and the loss of land in both cases. By working directly with the City of Ontario, HdV finally gained stable access to land in April 2013. Pitzer College became HdV’s fiscal sponsor, and we had plans to hand over the project to the community by developing a new non-profit. HdV incorporated with the State of California as a nonprofit organization in 2013 and is currently awaiting its federal 501(c)3 tax-exempt status. We still enjoy close relationships with Pitzer College, the Planning Department in the city of Ontario, and University of California, Irvine’s Community and Economic Development Legal Clinic (CED). With Pitzer acting as a fiscal sponsor, HdV was also named a subgrantee of a three-year Kaiser HEAL Zone initiative grant to promote healthy eating and active living in the city of Ontario.

Part of Huerta del Valle’s success has been the development of a community-university-municipal partnership. Interdependency and mutual support are woven through its history. The City of Ontario has granted the project a 10-year land-use agreement and will pay for water and trash pickup for the first three years. The land-use agreement is in Pitzer’s name. Until Huerta del Valle receives its federal tax-exempt designation, Pitzer will continue to act as fiscal sponsor. Significant community engagement has grown from these sources and benefits both the College and the city in turn—giving the City of Ontario a success to show to Kaiser and city officials, and giving shape to Pitzer’s ethos of social responsibility in local and global communities.

HdV’s mission is to cultivate an organization of community members to grow both organic crops and a community in Ontario. By growing food, the organization works toward sustainable community empowerment and health: creating meaningful work, building lasting skills and developing strong relationships within the city of Ontario. HdV’s vision is more complex: the project is designed to be a small-scale alternative to many modes of contemporary life. We envision it as a place where people form community over shared interests and work toward healthy, just and sustainable societies.

Huerta del Valle asserts that economic development in Ontario and the surrounding region does not have to look like building more warehouses. By creating a space where people can learn together, work together and grow together, we are attempting to construct new visions of community health, development and sustainability in the Inland Empire.

HdV’s core goals are to:

- Facilitate the growth of a local, sustainable food system
- Create dignified, educative, community health and development centered employment/opportunities for Ontario youth and adults
- Develop related local cooperatives for economic and environmental justice

HdV operates with four branches of work to accomplish these aims. Each programming component is at a different stage of development:

- Community gardening—developed
- Intensive sustainable food production and sales—initial
- Community building/organizing—initial
- Community education—emerging

Our four program areas were decided in a collaborative, shared decision-making process with Pitzer faculty, students and community members led by HdV’s community leader and executive director, Maria Teresa Alonso. We designed the programming areas to address particular community needs and to address particular challenges posed to quality of life, access to healthy food, safe clean environment and economic opportunity for low-income people in Ontario. All program areas are represented in the map below.
Huerta del Valle: A New Nonprofit in a Neglected Landscape

HdV intends to build several structures, including an educational outdoor/indoor classroom, a workshop/kitchen/rest area, a farm stand, improved storage sheds, a chicken coop, an area for other animals like goats and more hoop houses for sprouting, starting plants and worms. HdV would love to incorporate solar panels into the structure, as well as water catchment and aquaponic systems for fish production.

The community garden space contains three additional features of importance. First is a central community-gathering place where classes, parties, cookouts, meetings or general relaxation can take place. Second are two swales for natural water retention. Third is a 15-foot deep perimeter of permanent crops, such as fruit trees, herbs, berries, medicinal plants, sugar cane and other perennials like asparagus and artichokes. This is designed to be a drought-tolerant, self-managing agro-ecosystem and works as a contrast to the heavily managed community garden. It will provide useful crops, improve soil and garden quality over time and give privacy to neighbors. The community garden also contains the main entrance and will contain a mural and a small HdV farm stand.

Roughly two acres of garden space are devoted to an intensive-production urban farm that grows produce each season and sells it locally at affordable prices in farm stands, convenience stores and restaurants. The operation began with the goal that resulting sales would help to cover recurring garden expenses. The intensive production area aims to be a space for job creation, as well as sustainable agricultural production, education and training.

Along with the Redford Conservancy—Pitzer’s newest center dedicated to Southern California sustainability—we are attempting to develop a composting system where we transfer pre-consumer food scraps from the Pitzer dining hall. This will be a win-win, as the College will be able to boast that it composts all pre-consumer food waste, and HdV will have a stable source of waste from which to build soil to feed the garden. In addition, worm composting is set to start in July 2014.

HdV views itself as a resource for both the College and in the community and a space to build more resources. Through connection making and community building, a more tightly knit community can share resources that already exist in the neighborhood, such as tools, tutoring, food, skills and more. In addition, by partnering with Pitzer College and, in the future, other colleges, more resources in the form of educated young people, engaged professors and other institutional resources could be leveraged for the garden. Through its nonprofit status, the garden will also be in a position to facilitate grant writing to bring more economic resources into the community, as well as create resources through growing soil, food, jobs and educational opportunities, and initiate cooperatives for economic development. HdV also may join coalitions, support the development of other organizations, or start other community projects like other farms, restaurants, markets or community kitchens as it broadens its reach and scope.

Another goal of the program is to develop educational programming, workshops and training for youth and adults of all ages in building critical analysis of the Inland Empire and food issues.

We have linked workshops and speakers to the last few community monthly meetings; for example:

- Pitzer student Ru Apt gave a workshop on non-violent communication.
- Pitzer Professor Jose Calderon gave a talk on building social movements and resources to sustain movements.
- Gardener Francisco Solorzano offered a planting workshop to all members of the garden.
- A youth event offered workshops in zine making, planting, and healthy snack making.

HdV garden community members have also:

- Made regular trips to LA to visit the community rights campaign monthly meeting
- Visited food justice organizations in Los Angeles
- Learned about campaign organizing, political analysis and how other communities are working to bring about justice
- Conducted walking tours of Ontario neighborhoods

These examples are far from a standardized curriculum at the garden, but they reflect how HdV hopes education will look in the future: workshops for the community by the community in the community garden, educating about neighborhood and regional assets and challenges.

The above are examples of some of the work that HdV hopes to do now and in the future.
Building a new non-profit

Huerta del Valle’s recent incorporation represents a small step forward in what the Institute for Non-Profit Management has called a “unique set of challenges in the region.” The needs of the Inland Empire’s youthful and diverse population remain unmet by the nonprofit sector. San Bernardino hosts just 3.0 nonprofits per thousand residents, and local foundations have invested only $3 per capita in San Bernardino County compared to $119 per capita statewide. Huerta del Valle is an emerging nonprofit in a region where there are few change-oriented nonprofits of any kind—and a dearth of nonprofits as a whole.

Two false starts with local nonprofits hampered our progress early on. After these experiences, we decided that forming an independent nonprofit would grant us autonomy and structural stability.

Pitzer in Ontario Urban Fellow Lucy Block created a relationship with UC Irvine’s School of Law’s Community and Economic Development Clinic, which has since taken us on as a client and assisted us in the process of incorporation. After two years of preliminary meetings, Huerta del Valle held its first board meeting in November 2013. Members of the board were appointed as follows:

- Susan Phillips, chair (professor, Pitzer College/director, PIO Program)
- Arthur Levine, secretary and treasurer (urban fellow, Pitzer College)
- John Bridge, member (associate, Hogan Lovells Law Firm)
- Maria Teresa Alonso, member (executive director, Huerta del Valle)

The board also appointed then garden manager Maria Alonso as executive director of Huerta del Valle and adopted the by-laws of the organization. We also submitted IRS paperwork for our 501(c)3 status and are awaiting response.

Pitzer College continues to act as a fiscal sponsor for HdV as of this writing. To our knowledge this is only the second time in Pitzer’s history that the College has participated in the formation of a new non-profit. The first time was the founding of the Pomona Economic Opportunity Center—or “Day Labor” Center—spearheaded by Professor Jose Calderon. Calderon visited the garden for the first time in December 2013 as a special guest of student Marcela Jones and Executive Director Maria Teresa Alonso.

Board expansion is critical at this time. HdV hopes to expand its board to include more people from the community as well as national advisors, funders, organizers, youth, educators, chefs, political figures, city officials, youth and advocates in order to guide and protect Huerta del Valle into the future.

HdV has yet to formalize its organizational structure. The board decided after incorporation to allow the organization to develop organically and later define structures that work best. To date, decision-making bodies operate as follows:

- The committee meets weekly (5 to 15 persons). This committee makes decisions about ongoing issues at the garden, such as plot management, leadership, and collective production. This is the most consistent body that meets to handle decision making around garden planning and projects, including events, meetings, field trips, plot management, conflicts, and approval of select expenditures. The committee includes community members and Pitzer staff and students. It is also a space for leadership development where people learn to run meetings, create agendas, and develop public speaking skills. Most decisions are achieved through discussion and consensus. Some members of the committee have the responsibility of opening the garden once per
week, which has allowed the garden to have open hours every day of the week.

- The **membership** meets monthly (20 to 40 persons) and includes everyone who is involved in the garden—ranging from people who volunteer to people who have plots. The monthly meeting creates a space for the integration of new garden members, and for veteran gardeners to introduce new garden members to the project. At monthly meetings, the membership participates in special workshops, events, movie screenings and guest lectures. It is also a place for general updates and we hope a place where garden members can get to know the board.

- The **board** meets quarterly (currently 4 persons). Its primary job is to have big ears—to listen carefully to the people who are actually doing the work and to see what can be done to facilitate and develop their work. The board looks more broadly; its gaze is not in the soil but everywhere else in terms of creating connections for the organization—from people in Ontario to people in national and international arenas. The board is the most equipped for seeking out foundation and other funding and for legal advising and general connection building that supports the Huerta del Valle’s longevity and growth. Hopefully, our board will be made up of a more diverse membership of community members, youth, and food movement and community development advisors.

Students continue to be active in all aspects of Huerta del Valle, and they often have multi-semester and multi-year involvement.

**Conclusion**

Critical next steps for HdV include further development of key programming areas. Excellence in our work will allow us to strengthen our organization, through grant-getting and through continuing the cooperative partnerships with Pitzer College and the City of Ontario.

The Pitzer in Ontario program began this project in fall 2010 as part of a new trajectory of longitudinal community-based research. We pulled more from student interest in food justice than we did from community interest—in essence getting the community-based, participatory research equation backward. However, each conversation we had about food justice issues—with community members, with city or county officials, or with nonprofit leaders—seemed to open doors. What began as a student-heavy effort is now in the hands of the community, and a new, community-led nonprofit has emerged as a result.

HdV would not exist without the strength of community-university partnership between Pitzer College, the City of Ontario, and Ontario community members. Maria Teresa Alonso—first HdV’s garden manager and now executive director of Huerta del Valle—became involved because she was already a promotora through Pitzer’s community-based Spanish program run by Professor Ethel Jorge. Students engaged in both programs made the connection early on, and the garden benefited as a result.

Also, our relationship with the City of Ontario’s Planning Department has been critical. The Planning Department staffers—in particular Karen Thompson, Cathy Wahlstrom and Jerry Blum—have given personal and institutional support to the project. College and City supportive structures have helped to incubate Huerta del Valle; this project would not exist without them.

Huerta del Valle hopes to gain a level of independence that will allow us to promote
economic development, to work for environmental justice, to strengthen local food justice strategies and to build critical and radical analysis of the region.

Thinking back on the anniversary event of April 5, I consider the growth of our first year of work in the garden inspiring. In a way, our journey is just beginning. As a fledgling nonprofit, HdV’s real work of fundraising and capacity building have been greater challenges with few guarantees of success. But we now have a strong base from which to grow our organization, to continue to immerse Pitzer students in community-based learning opportunities and research, and to engage multiple communities in grassroots organizing and local social change toward urban sustainability.

References


The Community Foundation for the benefit of San Bernardino County.

www.city-data.com/city/Ontario-California.html
Paul Faulstich’s Reflective Review of Susan A. Phillips’ Essay

“Social change from the ground up” is how Susan Phillips characterizes the nature of the community garden she discusses in her essay.

Community does not materialize out of thin air. It germinates from a form of mutualism that enables people to thrive. Community needs to be nurtured so that it develops deep roots and lofty ideals, and it must be harvested so that it nurtures its members. In short, community must be grown.

A vigorous community requires healthy inputs in order to generate sustaining outputs. A vigorous community provides sustenance through which people thrive, and from the growth of community comes regeneration. Sometimes, when a community is depleted, external inputs can help bolster it such that it is restored and invigorated. Herein lies the brilliance and value of the Huerta del Valle community garden in Ontario. Susan’s essay discusses the garden as a resource that requires resources. And, I would suggest, it has developed through resourcefulness. Such is the nature of “resource,” a word that brings to mind regeneration. Re-sourcing, like a spring fed by snowmelt, and, in turn, continually flowing forth.

Our ideas of community engagement should be bent, stretched, broken and remade. As the other essays in anthology likewise demonstrate, civic partnerships are deeply problematized pedagogical enterprises. They are complex and often messy. They deserve thoughtful reflection, open communication, continual adjustment. And, as Susan so joyfully insinuates, they also deserve bouncy houses and birthday cakes.

Like the cycles of the garden itself, the feedback loops of community engagement help all constituents—in this case the intersecting communities of the city of Ontario and Pitzer College—to prosper. Just as one might ask, “How does your garden grow?,” Susan asks, “How does your community grow?” Her answer is at once simple and complex: Communities grow through collaboration and amalgamation. They grow from engagement and communitarianism. They grow from struggle and joy. Susan is keen to affirm that, just as the community of Ontario grows from this collaboration, so too does the Pitzer community. Indeed, as I imagine Susan would eagerly affirm, “Pitzer” and “Ontario” are not entirely discrete communities. They exist as components of the greater whole to which we belong. They embody Susan’s words, “for the community by the community in the community.”