

Interview with Joe Lesiak
Environmental/Farm Educator and former NHEP Board Chair
Germai Medhanie
(partial transcript; stopped at 9 min. 21 seconds)

(outside of Common Ground High School, July 26, 2007)

Germai: Where are we, Joe?

Joe: We're at Common Ground high school, Springside Avenue farm, it's a state charter high school, got started in 1997. The state put out a number of RP's for charters, and we put one out, and got it. The program was actually started by the New Haven ecology project; this project was put together by a number of activists that were educators, high school and grade school, scholars throughout the area, farmers, and environmental activists. The impetus to start environmental education programs came from educators' experience that students knew very little about the environment and even less about where food comes from. So part of our project was to provide environmental education programs for the public, and as it turned out, even though we became a nonprofit in 1990, it wasn't until 1997 that we actually got the charter for the high school and then leased this property which was an old farm, Springside Avenue Farm. It actually has the spring still over here that produced water for people in this neighborhood for a long long time.

Germai: So how many workers work here on this farm?

Joe: It all depends, we have a lot of volunteers and interns and actually paid staff. We have four that work for the New Haven Ecology project and two of us now, this summer, are dedicated to the garden, and we have student employment programs working the garden as well. And we have a farmer's market that summer

employees go to. The summer employees take care of the food from the time they harvest it to the time they sell it; they work not only in the garden, they do light construction projects and marketing of produce.

Germai: Where are we in relationship to the city?

Joe: On the Northwest corner of New Haven; to our West is West Rock Ridge State Park, one of the largest parks in the city and the state, actually. To our east is New Haven, to our North is Hamden, to our south is New Haven. So we're right on a very rural part of New Haven. We have Southern Connecticut State University less than a quarter of a mile away. It's on the edge of the city, sort of wild parklands here.

Germai: What is the composition of the students in terms of income and race?

Joe; Most of our kids are low middle class in terms of income. 95% are from New Haven, that includes Fair Haven and Westville, the Hill, all the different sections of New Haven. It is an interdistrict school. In the charters they didn't allow for the sending district to provide transportation for poor kids to get here, so it's really a disincentive if they come from another district, because you have to drive or spend quite a bit of time on the bus to get here. But our racial population is about 55% African American, 30% Hispanic, the rest are other races.

Germai: What is the expectation of the students, to have this organic farm here? How do they react?

Joe: Two things. Many of the students really like to be outside, and it's new to them. Many of the parents and grandparents are the main pushers behind the kids being here. They have to sign up for a lottery system and then they can come to our school. And once

the kids get here they have an experience of shock because it's not a traditional school, in the sense that some of the classwork is actually done outside. So when you read about something in your schoolwork you actually go outside and verify it. Being in the forest, the garden, in the fields around here, or with the animals that we have -- we have goat, sheep, ducks, chickens, turkeys, and a cat and a dog.

Germai: How many hours are students required to spend in the field?

Joe: Well, we used to be able to have the kids outside more often, but with the changes in No Child Left Behind, the teachers are really trying to focus on enabling them to pass exams, so they're able to spend less time. As a freshman, a student might be outside 4-5 hours a week, from field hikes, to exploration of the ridge, through physical education. There's bioinventory where they go through a process of inventory of flora and fauna, so it varies depending on what class they're in. But early on, they start getting out into the field here, the garden, the woods, and start to explore that. It's used as a means of enabling them to make real what they are learning in their classes.

Germai: Who benefits the harvest? Who enjoys the fruit of this beautiful organic farm?

Joe: Well, our garden is mainly set up for educational purposes, so the production aspect -- this is the biggest productive part, we also have a demonstration garden -- but this food is meant to go predominantly to the school. To the cafeteria. So we plant a bit later, we plant trying to capitalize on when the kids are going to be here. Early in the spring, so that before they go they'll have produce, and then stall a little bit so our produce will be more ripe and full when the kids get back. In the meantime, though, what we do is we produce for the market, the farmer's market, we're going

on Wed. and Sundays, students work full-time at the one on Wednesday, we harvest here and then go downtown, that's for public sale of our produce. That money will be put back into the garden and our programs here.