Building Community, Soil & Knowledge

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Volunteers lend a hand at Peaceful Grounds Center for Agriculture and Sustainable Living in Indianapolis (above). Chickens help provide fertility to the center's soils.

Peaceful Grounds Brings Agriculture Closer to Home

by SHAWNDRA MILLER

A half-dozen college students, pitchforks in hand, cluster around Linda Proffitt as she digs her gloved hand into a decomposing pile of wood chips and beer mash. The founder of Indianapolis' urban farming center, Peaceful Grounds, is on the hunt for the creatures that make her job possible. About 4 inches down she finds them: red wiggler worms. She pulls out a handful of compost to show the students.

"This is the essence of life, you guys," she says. She reminds them of the "no bees, no food" warnings heard so often. She would add to that: no *worms*, no food.

Red wigglers make the world turn, in Proffitt's parlance. Here at Peaceful Grounds Center for Agriculture and Sustainable Living, the worms are responsible for turning an influx of beer mash and wood chips – each amounting to roughly 10 tons per week – into powerful soil amendments. The project uses practices advocated by urban farming champion Will Allen, whose Growing Power organization designated Peaceful Grounds as a regional outreach training center in 2011.

A 100-foot hoop house and a half-dozen long rows of mounded material (or "habitats" in Proffitt's terms) mark this portion of the Marion County Fairgrounds – bordered by the equine and poultry barns – as farmland. To the 75 college students assembled for a day of service, who drove past Indiana cornfields to get here, it may not look much like the farms they usually see. But as teams fan out over the complex to pull spent plants, tend chickens and winterize the hoop house on this blustery fall day, Proffitt hopes they have their eyes opened to possibility.

A team leader shows the youth how to use their pitchforks to cover a pile of spent squash plants with half-finished compost. Though it isn't apparent by the smell, this particular compost includes elephant dung.

"This is elephant manure from the elephants that were at the state fair," Proffitt tells the students, toeing the decomposing clods. "Their truck broke down so they brought it here. And while the elephants were here, they left deposits."

While this particular source may be unusual, transforming local waste products into fertility is one of Peaceful Grounds' specialties. Supported by the Efroymson Family Fund of Central Indiana Community Foundation, Peaceful Grounds is part of Global Peace Initiatives, a nonprofit founded by Proffitt in 2006.

Global Peace Initiatives' board president Carl Ellison calls the orga-

nization "the little train that could" because of the way its initiatives have expanded in recent years. He has been with the nonprofit almost since the beginning and says its evolution has matched the increasing focus on healthy food among urbanites.

"Given the continuing movement toward a healthier lifestyle and away from processed foods, Peaceful Grounds has a high upside in both addressing consumer needs for information and products they need," said Ellison.

Proffitt holds a social work degree and readily admits she never expected to farm. She began her work in local food systems years ago when she coordinated the supplemental food program for a prominent Indianapolis food bank. Witnessing the reach of poverty, she started Global Peace Initiatives with the hope of inviting more mindfulness and peace into city denizens' lives. She led "peace hikes" in her own neighborhood and other areas of town where up to 60 percent of the homes might be vacant or abandoned.

Service work was often part of the experience: hikers picked up litter or sowed sunflower seeds.

"We were walking in the vacant lots of my neighborhood ... and as we were taking the peace walk and planting sunflower seeds, we said, 'There's so many vacant lots here. We could start a garden and call it a peace garden.'"

The idea stuck. Her work for the food pantry showed her the inverse relationship between peace and hunger: Without food to eat, how could a person even begin to create peace? Marion County is rife with food deserts, where low-income residents have a hard time finding food beyond convenience store fare. Walk Score, a service that measures walkability of neighborhoods nationwide, rates Indianapolis as the worst city for food access based on the percentage of people who can walk to a grocery store within five minutes.

Addressing these issues was the goal of a six-year Peace Gardens initiative – Peaceful Grounds' precursor. Proffitt built partnerships with local churches and schools, leading large groups of volunteers installing gardens all over the city. Each garden was intended to grow food specifically

Peaceful Grounds attracts large numbers of volunteers, and in its first year more than 2,000 youth gave nearly 19,000 volunteer hours to the center.

for food pantries while also bringing people together to experience the transformational power of service. Over the years 46 vegetable gardens were planted and tended with volunteer labor.

As her investment in urban agriculture grew, she realized the challenges of farming in city soil. Many urban lots were laced with lead and arsenic. Meanwhile a great deal of agricultural knowledge had been lost to the generations. What was needed, she found, was a resource both for best practices and for healthy soil.

"We were training agencies to grow food, and we wanted to show them what kind of production they could do – we wanted a model of good urban farming."

That's the role of Peaceful Grounds. Not only was it featured in Augustus Jenkins Farmer's book *Deep-Rooted Wisdom* in a chapter called "Stop Tilling the Soil," it also draws people from all walks of life to see first hand how to farm in an urban setting.

Longtime volunteer Cindy Dudley has seen Proffitt's passion manifest through several initiatives over the years.

"Linda had the vision and she carried it out," Dudley said. "It all started with a sunflower garden in the sign of a peace symbol. That's when I came on board."

What keeps Dudley invested after all this time is her relationship with Proffitt and the tone she sets.

"It seems like all the volunteers are so excited about the possibilities of vermicompost and growing vegetables. Just the spirit of it keeps me coming back."

Now making its home base in the Cattle Barn at the fairgrounds, the center hosts volunteers from all over the country. In its first year, more than 2,000 youth gave nearly 19,000 volunteer hours to the building of Peaceful Grounds. Some church groups travel from as far away as Texas, Florida and New York for the chance to learn and serve in an urban agriculture setting. Other helpers, like Dudley, are just minutes away.

During the summer, when youth groups sign up to help at a rate of some 50 volunteers a day, Dudley has been known to put in 20 hours a week helping direct the volunteer labor. She believes that what attracts people to Peaceful Grounds is not only the possibility of hands-on learning, but Proffitt's passion. "She draws volunteers in because she does have such a big heart. People want to help her and believe in what she's doing."

Proffitt doesn't run programming in a traditional workshop environment. Instead, she extends an invitation to all comers to help out with the demonstration farm's day-to-day needs, so they can get real-time training in urban agriculture.

Just as these college students today are getting a lesson in where their food comes from, and why red wiggler worms are so important.

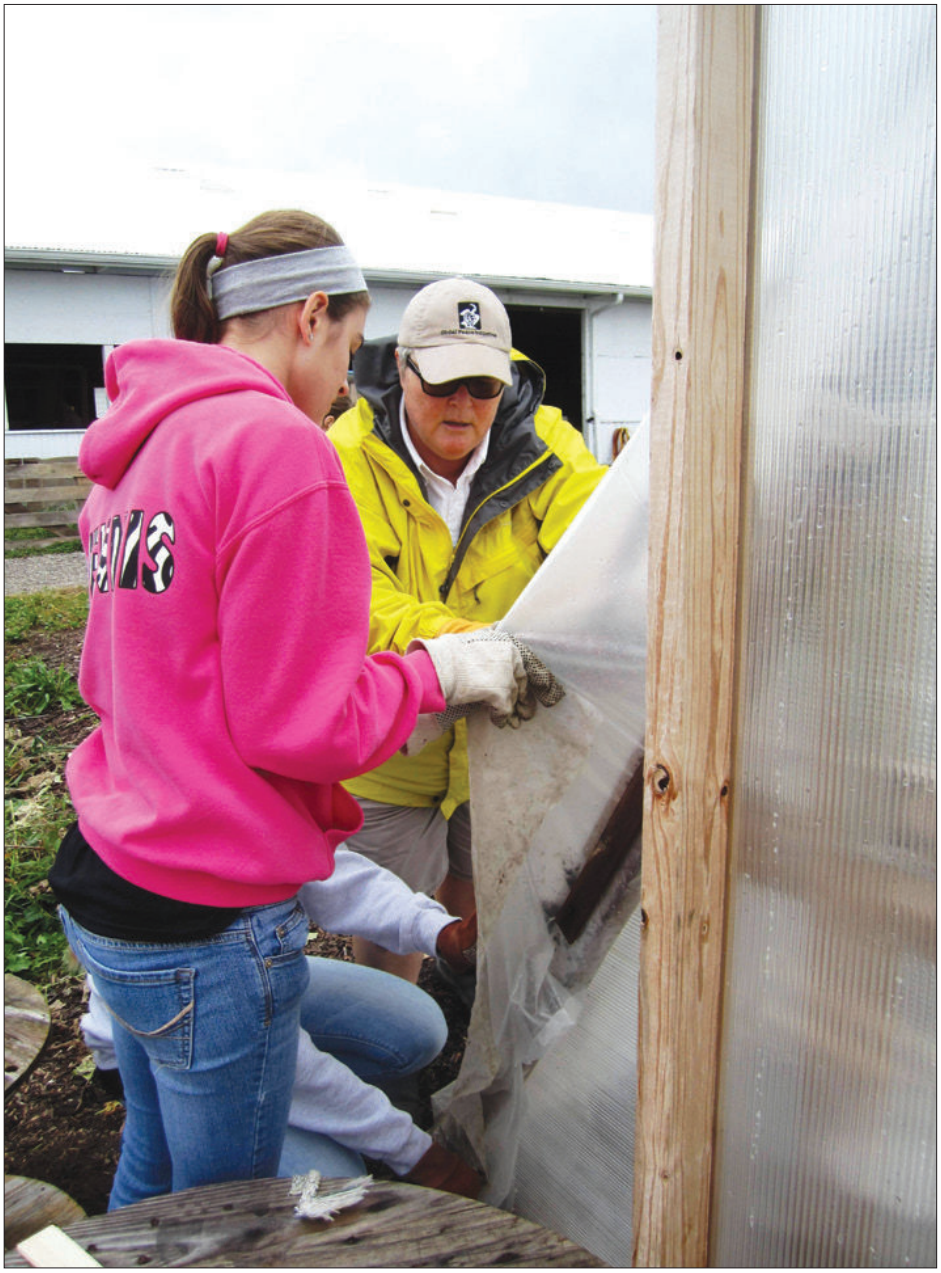
"Worm casting is their manure," she explains. "It's the best supplement you can use on any plant at all. It's pure fertility." The soil supplement is so potent that only one tablespoon per plant per month will support a healthy growth boost.

Peaceful Grounds' worms live in habitats made of compost, laid atop a base of 24 inches of mulch blanketing the entire site. As a demonstration farm for urban ag, the site shows how to deal with contaminated ground by building soil on top of this protective

Peaceful Grounds' Vermicompost Instructions

1. Mix a 50/50 carbon to nitrogen ratio. With a moist nitrogen product like beer mash, Proffitt recommends increasing to 75 percent nitrogen by volume, to account for loss of moisture.
2. Make a large heap – for home composting, make sure the pile is at least one yard wide and one yard deep. This gives the pile weight to aid in breaking down the material.
3. Keep it moist enough to clump together in your hand.
4. Turn at least once a month, or whenever the pile reaches 160 degrees, until the temperature stops peaking. If it's turned every four days, you can make 29-day compost.
5. Add red wiggler worms and give them 90 days to turn the compost into vermicompost.

Rosie Bishop works on a project at Peaceful Grounds.



Linda Proffitt (at right), founder of Peaceful Grounds, works with students volunteering at the center.

layer of wood chips. Each winter, the raised rows of growing medium are enriched by new infusions of well-aged compost. But each worm habitat started out as a 50/50 blend of nitrogen and carbon – beer mash from two local microbrewers and wood chips from area tree trimming companies.

Though the demonstration farm where the youth are working contains working compost, most of Peaceful Grounds' compost is held in vast heaps elsewhere on the fairgrounds. A volunteer skid-steer loader operator mixes the largest piles once a season, and smaller piles are mixed manually when they come to 160 degrees.

Once the compost temperatures peak, it's time to inoculate the habitat with worms, or allow them to migrate there on their own. After about 90 days, the worms have digested the material into vermicompost. A large tumbler allows further sorting of the vermicompost into two grades. The finer grade castings are marketed as a soil supplement in quart and gallon sizes. The coarser grade is used and sold as potting material.

Microgreens can be grown right in this growing medium. In fact, the nonprofit sells kits for people to grow their own radish and sunflower microgreens. Using worm castings to start seedlings gives worm tea as another output.

"When we water our plants that we started in vermicompost," she explains. "We've got trays that collect all the runoff water." This rich tea is gathered in buckets for use on garden plants.

For today's students, she breaks it down this way: "The worms' manure attaches to the carbon, which might look like mulch. That wood carbon is exactly what is breaking down and making the organic matter around the manure, which makes really nice soil. That's the carbon fixing process."

While mixing every four days would be ideal, the agency lacks the capacity to do that for now. Mixed that often, the compost would be finished within 29 days. One goal for this year is to ramp up mechanization – especially since the two microbrewers that send beer mash are increasing their production.

She may expand the project into aquaponics, or raising fish and vegetables in an integrated setup. Because such a system is energy-intensive, Proffitt is exploring using wind and solar energy. She hopes to enlist an engineering class to test the viability of a solar-run hydroponics system as an initial prototype.

Also in the planning stage is increased livestock production. Making the project self-supporting is a priority, and this spring she hopes a weekly farmers' market gets more traction than it did this year, with increased publicity. Soil amendments, produce and artisan products will be available for sale.

The market space inside the barn is another potential moneymaker: People can lease it for rustic weddings or other special events. She envisions creating an outdoor reception area on the lawn, with decorative gardens built on a layer of mulch. Though aging wooden boxes delineate raised

The 100-foot hoop house at Peaceful Grounds.

Breanna Dyer leads children in working on the grounds.

beds in the grass now, these will soon be torn down to make way for free-form beds over wood chips.

"These came with the package," she explains, indicating the boxes. "I did not design these. This winter they are leaving the show. We're going to do it our style." Perhaps hops plants will twine over an arbor, to give couples a unique wedding spot.

Inside, tables and benches made of recycled pallet wood testify to Proffitt's commitment to repurposing and upcycling. Chimney lamps hang from short braces high on several beams. Banners displaying local artists' work hang above the volunteer-built stage.

She's quick to praise the volunteers who made it all happen, because – just like the farm outside – the barn's interior was entirely created through donated labor.

Standing on the stage, she tells today's crew, who worked through gusting wind and intermittent drizzle, that their service makes them "the highest form of peacemaker."

She circulates among the small groups debriefing as the morning wraps up. The young people comment that they never realized how much work goes into growing food, that teamwork makes things go faster, that "there's infinitely more worms than I ever knew, and they're everywhere."

Just a month into the semester, Proffitt's already had some 600 students leave their handprints on the place. It's work she clearly relishes. She tells the story of a Marion University student who grew up on a farm. As a homeschooler, many of his lessons pertained to farm life. After volunteering at Peaceful Grounds, he told Proffitt it was the first time he felt at home.

Beyond college students and church groups, Proffitt relies on a core group of regulars to sustain operations. One of these is Gena Landers, who lives "right across the field" in a nearby subdivision.

Landers' discovery of Peaceful Grounds earlier this year coincided with her awakening to everything that's wrong with the industrial food system. She'd seen the film *Food, Inc.*, and learned how a handful of companies monopolize the meat and grain industries.

"What I learned in that documentary grieved me so," she said. "I was not excited about eating food anymore. I didn't know what I was eating, if it was meeting the needs of my

body, how much of it is GMO …" But driving by the Marion County Fairgrounds one day, she saw signs for Peaceful Grounds, and eventually stopped in.

Hearing Proffitt's passionate talk of soil building, worms and growing healthy food gave Landers hope again. She'd been unemployed for over two years and had time to give. "So in all of this, I became the chicken lady," she says. She stops by every day for chicken feeding and anything else that needs to be done.

Another helper, Tracy Kiefer, each year travels five hours from her home in Quincy, Illinois, to spend a week working at Peaceful Grounds. As a commission-based worker, she doesn't have paid vacation time, but she prioritizes this unpaid week out of love for the cause.

Kiefer takes what she learns back home to her friends and neighbors, and encourages everyone she knows to consider offering their time to Peaceful Grounds. Her most recent visit came during the week of the Marion County fair, when Will Allen visited Peaceful Grounds for its official grand opening. Fairgoers saw the demonstration farm in full operation, along with a showcase of local art and performances. And Kiefer got to see the realization of the visionary founder's dream.

She recalls a four-year-old boy who dug out a tiny worm while Proffitt was giving her vermicompost talk. "He found that and watched it wiggle," she remembers. "Linda talked to him about how that was a baby. And you know, that little boy, in his own way, was understanding what she was doing there."

But Proffitt is far from done dreaming. The best is yet to come, she says. She has begun providing consultation to large-scale farmers who want to transition their land to a more sustainable model. Believing the lessons gleaned from this teaching/learning center can apply to large-scale agriculture, she's eager to explore the possibilities.

No matter what comes next, Peaceful Grounds will remain a key resource for urban farmers in Indianapolis – and beyond, if today's students are any indication; some hail from as far away as Taiwan and Saudi Arabia. Regardless of where they come from, Proffitt hopes everyone connected with the facility experiences a sense of community around farming.

"It's the community that makes good food," she said. "And that sense of community is the most important thing that we can bring back to agriculture."

NEED MORE INFORMATION?
For more on Peaceful Grounds Center for Agriculture and Sustainable Living visit *globalpeaceinitiatives.net/index.php/peaceful-grounds-demonstration-farm,* call 317-222-1556 or email *info@globalpeaceinitiatives.net*.