

Kids get back to the land; [Final Edition]

Naoibh O'Connor. Vancouver Courier. Vancouver, B.C.: Jun 15, 2005. pg. 16

Copyright Vancouver Courier 2005

Vincent Helton left his family's grain and livestock farm on the Alberta prairie in the 1940s, but his days tending the soil didn't end there.

Now 83, he's sharing his farming knowledge with Vancouver students through a UBC program called Intergenerational Landed Learning, which is finishing up its third year at the UBC Farm.

Developed by university education professors Jolie Mayer-Smith and Linda Peterat, the program matches retired farmers, or other agriculture experts, with three to five elementary kids to teach them about growing organic food and land sustainability.

"We believe children today are completely disconnected from the earth--they don't know where food comes from and they don't realize food systems, farms and land are all part of the ecosystem and that they're part of it, too," Mayer-Smith said.

Helton helps minimize that disconnect every second Wednesday when he mentors three boys who know little about agriculture. "Everyone in Canada should have some idea where food comes from and what workers of the land have to do with the economy," he said. "And it also teaches them about the environment."

Aside from planting and harvesting crops, his young students learn about weeds and predator worms called wire worms. In a small experiment, they used chips of potatoes to attract the small white, wiry creatures so they could examine them.

Helton said the sessions also teach urban kids important lessons about self-reliance and physical labour.

The Intergenerational Landed Learning project began in 2002 with 18 students and a handful of retired farmers. With money from the Investment Agriculture Foundation of B.C., it's expanded to include about 100 participants from Grades 4 and 5 at Queen Elizabeth elementary and Grades 6 and 7 at Graham Bruce.

Gillian Duncan, who works at Queen Elizabeth and is one of several teachers involved in the initiative, lauds the program as enlightening. "[Students] go to the grocery store and pick something up and they don't know how it begins and the processes that gets it to the final product," she said. "For a lot of them it's been eye-opening."

Duncan's class enjoys the hands-on nature of the program, including planting seeds, watching them grow and harvesting the food. Back at school, the experience is tied to the curriculum through other lessons in language arts, math and science. "It's been very successful with our students--even more successful than I originally thought," she said.

Since not enough retired farmers could be found to take part, agro-ecology and graduate students also help mentor the children. A summer program is being added this year for the first time.

"We've been hugely impressed with how this experience has influenced their thinking about farms, farming and farmers," Mayer-Smith said, pointing out many students held story book notions of agricultural life. "Now, they have a fundamental understanding of where food comes from and [know] that farmers aren't all men in overalls and straw hats. They're educated professionals and both men and women are farmers."