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Students at Terra Nova High School grow a farm -- and a unique produce business

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By **Melissa Navas, The Oregonian**  Follow

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Faith Cathcart/ The Oregonian

Jenny Carmona (cq), steps with care through the lemon cucumber patch at Terra Nova Farm. "I really like harvesting. I like working with the plants," she says. For Carmona, a junior at Terra Nova High School, farming had a calming effect. "It was kind of like an escape for me."



Paul Hudak watches the plow chisel through the sod of the baseball field. Hudak grimaces each time the plow hooks clank. Has the driver punctured something hidden under the soil - maybe pipes?

Hudak's farmer friends have told him he is crazy to try to convert the field at Terra Nova High School into a productive student farm. And his untested idea of a student-run business selling produce to subscribers won't fly, either.


The new teacher will need to win over those students, quickly. He will peddle seeds, talk about soil pH levels and try to muster interest.

It will be a tough sell in a place where many of the 60 students have more important

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concerns: failing grades, relationship quandaries and just fitting in at Terra Nova, a small high school focusing on individualized learning in the Beaverton School District.

Undaunted, Hudak imagines students growing corn, kale and tomatoes on this 3/4-acre patch. But first, before the autumn rains settle in, the plow slowly cuts through the chunks of earth between second and third base.

The earth looks like fractured pottery, a sure sign of compacted clay soil, not friendly for fruits and vegetables.

Growing up in upstate New York, Hudak was surrounded by farmland. At 15, he worked on a farm where they grew everything from flowers to blueberries to squash.

He attended two colleges in The State University of New York system and fully intended to become a teacher. But he dropped out and veered in another direction.

"I knew that my calling was always agriculture."

Hudak took a cross-country train trip, stopping at farms along the way to find the right farm. "It was love at first sight coming through Oregon."

At 21, he moved to Persephone Farm in Lebanon south of Salem to an apprenticeship with plans to one day buy his own farm. Hudak also traveled for a year, living on family farms in Finland, Belgium, France and Italy. He went on to start Forest Meadow Farm in Silverton with friends, then moved to Grants Pass to still another farm -- this one stocked an adjoining restaurant and bakery -- that fit his local food ethic: "I'm a big proponent of not having to haul our food farther than we need."

In 2007, he uprooted for a girlfriend in Portland. Within weeks, Hudak landed a part-time job with Terra Nova's Conservation Corps, taking students to do environmental service work and maintain parks in the Tualatin Hills Park & Recreation District.

On his first visit to the school, he spotted the barren ball field behind it. "I was like, 'Um, yeah.'"

Things just fell into place. Then-principal Gary Myers immediately saw that a farm fit the school's philosophy to connect kids with their interests and allow them to explore them with internships.

The school received a multi-year environmental education grant through the Oregon Community Foundation Gray Family Fund to start the farm and hire Hudak, 31, whose position is partly paid for by the Beaverton School District.

Hudak, who wears a perma-smile and describes his favorite foods as "super good" or "amazing," devotes long hours to planning the program.

"He sort of fell in our laps," Myers says. "I just felt really fortunate to have him show up on our doorstep."

Call Mike Morton a reluctant farmer. After three years of struggle at Sunset High School in Beaverton, the 17-year-old with the ear-length straw-blond hair lands at Terra Nova. He hopes to find a place where he can connect with teachers and raise his grades -- things he never did at Sunset because he felt out of place and disengaged.

His mom chides him to sign up for the farm internship, but Morton has seen Hudak, a jeans-and-shirt guy with a Zen-like demeanor, around school.

"No, it's hippie," he remembers telling his mom. "I don't want to do it."

Until Hudak, who lets his curly, dirty blond ponytail stick out from a baseball cap, asks for help building a hothouse for tomatoes. Morton drafts a design within a day -- and he sticks around for the season. The kid who once slept in late, skipped classes, gave up on his plans of becoming a firefighter, finds something he's good at.

It's well into fall -- when farmers prep for spring -- and the students try to keep up with the heap of new information.

The first semester farm crew of nine page through catalogs with purple carrots and multi-colored squash. Most of them aren't wild about fruits and vegetables, but these are cool -- strange varieties grocery stores typically don't stock.






They order seeds, build an irrigation system. Though they will practice organic farming

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methods, they can't label the farm organic without official certification.

Even before the seeds are planted, students like junior Jenny Carmona can picture the field at harvest, brimming with fruits and vegetables. Even once-dubious students like senior Cassidy Ringwald -- who didn't like being told what to do and was on the verge of being kicked out of the farm program -- have come around. Ringwald, 17, who dresses in all black, now volunteers for extra chores and still manages to keep his grades up.

Hudak's enthusiasm is rubbing off.

Other schools in Oregon have gardens for the kids; some even provide fresh food for lunches. But Terra Nova's is believed to be the first high school community supported agriculture (CSA) program in Oregon, one of a handful across the country. Trillium Charter School in North Portland once operated a small CSA with students ages 8 to 12.

It's a simple notion. CSAs started in the 1960s in Europe and Japan -- a pact between consumers looking for quality food and farmers looking for stable markets. CSAs jumped to the United States in the mid-1980s and took off.

Furthermore, sustainable agriculture organizations have tried to spur interest among youth to teach them how food grows, where it comes from and about healthy eating.

There are more than 130 listings for Oregon CSAs on LocalHarvest.org, a Web site pinpointing such programs nationwide, including Terra Nova's, tucked away in Portland on Northwest Thompson Road near the Multnomah and Washington county line.

On the receiving end of Terra Nova's bounty is Carol Grimes, one of 18 subscribers. She lucks into the deal because of a chance meeting with Hudak at a farmers market. Other local CSAs are already booked with subscribers for the season. For \$500, Grimes, who wants to eat healthier, picks up a box of seasonal fresh fruits and veggies each Thursday from May to October. The boxes are so full, she invites friends over for weekly dinner parties to spread the wealth.

"Knowing that I'm supporting a really valuable program that's in my own community, and in addition is with high school students," Grimes says, "really makes this experience meaningful."

Terra Nova students return from summer break just as the farm reaches full bloom. In one corner, tomatoes in reds, oranges and yellows dangle from the vine. Across the field, cornstalks and bursting sunflowers tower. Closest to the street, violet cosmos and soft pink straw flowers add crayon colors to a sea of green. Drivers speeding around the curve slow down. What's going on, they ask.

Levi Jennings is one of seven students picked to work with Hudak over the summer to manage the farm. A \$12,000 grant allows each student to earn a small stipend. For many, it's their first job.

Jennings, who has a persistent 5 o'clock shadow, unlike his peers, is a human encyclopedia rattling off factoids about how flowers can suck away a plant's energy from the vegetables it produces. He demonstrates the correct way to pick Sun Gold cherry tomatoes, which are so sweet the students call them "sugar bombs."

"This plant is growing because of me," says the 16-year-old junior, whose interests in nature conservation and biology dovetail at the farm.

Students here have become independent. Instead of asking Hudak how to organize the hundreds of flowers they picked, they form an assembly line. Rock music blares from a boombox as students bundle the blooms into bouquets.

The farm, producing more than expected, signs up three more CSA members.

The work is a lot hotter than the students expected, too. "This is a job that most people would kill themselves if they had," says Ringwald, who once nearly quit the farm program. "In the summertime in the heat, it's horrible working out here. With Paul, he keeps our enthusiasm up a lot."

But Carmona, who thought the farm would have chickens like her grandmother's farm in Mexico, sees the space as a refuge. During the summer, she stresses about her family's move into a new home. "It's like a little sanctuary to go to."

During lunch break, the crew sits together in Hudak's classroom. On this warm day, he

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carries in a watermelon from the farm. With everything they grow, the students sample it before giving it to members.

"This thing's a beast," Hudak says as he slices through the red flesh. As they eat, the room silences. Juice slides down the students' chins and onto their hands, crusted with dirt.

Hudak asks if they think this Crimson Sweet variety is good. They nod. "We should do all watermelon next year," Ringwald says.

If they harvest the seeds, Hudak tells them, they can use them next season. Eventually, the seeds will adapt to Terra Nova's microclimate to make for even better watermelon.

"The way that humans evolve," Hudak tells them, "plants evolve."

This is a classroom without walls, where it's not about lecturing. Hudak wants his students to have fun, just as he did on his first farm job. Science served with watermelon.

It's late October, the last day of the first season. Farmer Greg Malinowski, who farms nearby and who helped plow up the sod last year, is back. He tills under any plants still left standing.

Instead of pottery pieces, the ground looks sifted. The till moves it like an electric mixer stirring dry chocolate cake mix. It's a testament to Hudak and the students -- and to the power of chicken manure, donated by Stutzman Environmental Products in Canby and the ZooDoo fertilizer from the Oregon Zoo -- to amend and fertilize.

The fall farm crew stops to watch Malinowski churn their year's work back into the ground. Student Mike Morton -- the once reluctant farmer -- stands there longest -- and says he's not sad to see the farm go because he knows its soul is still there. Then he holds out his digital camera to snap a picture of himself with the farm in the backdrop.

He's more excited about school and is on track to earn his high school diploma, one of the minimum requirements to becoming a firefighter.

Farming is still hippie, Morton says. "I still think that. Maybe I'm just a hippie, too."

Levi Jennings and Cassidy Ringwald didn't come to see any of the hoopla. They continue to wash beets. They've changed in little ways. Jennings eats healthier; his new favorite vegetable is kohlrabi, a small, bulbous, cabbage variety. Ringwald takes ownership in the garden, even warning students during a schoolwide farm tour not to step on plants. "We grow with love," Ringwald says. Both say they'll be back next season.

That night, the students and CSA members come together for their third and last potluck: homemade pizza with tomatoes and pesto, stuffed acorn squash with melted cheddar cheese, fresh tomato salsa and pumpkin pie.

Hudak mingles with everyone. He wants to share the successful model with other schools. "My biggest hopes were that the students would enjoy doing it. It's definitely inspired me to make this the best it can be."

This winter, he will re-apply for the environmental education grant, though funds are not guaranteed. In order to make the program more self-sustainable, Terra Nova will try to double the CSA membership next spring.

Inside, everyone celebrates their first season.

Outside, just across from the party, the field still smells of a mix of cilantro, basil and dirt. Along with the good bugs and bad bugs that give and take from the farm, the students will return -- next season.

On this terra nova, a farm is resting.

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For more information

Terra Nova Community Farm: <http://tncfarm.org/>

Paul Hudak: 503-577-7612 or paul_hudak@beavton.k12.or.us.






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 **GaelIX** November 08, 2009 at 11:38PM


That is a very good program for the Tera Nova high school. This is a big help for the students personality and development. This will further help in finding the students own personaly and likings. Plus, this would also encourage and inspire the parents to maybe make this as a family business for an extra income and hobby too.

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 **mikestky** November 09, 2009 at 5:13AM


Great story! And great work by the teacher & the students.
I wish they had this sort of stuff when I was in High School. I did work on a farm (in Milwaukie), picking cilantro, onions and beets but we just picked the final product; we didn't plant it and watch it from beginning to end.

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