

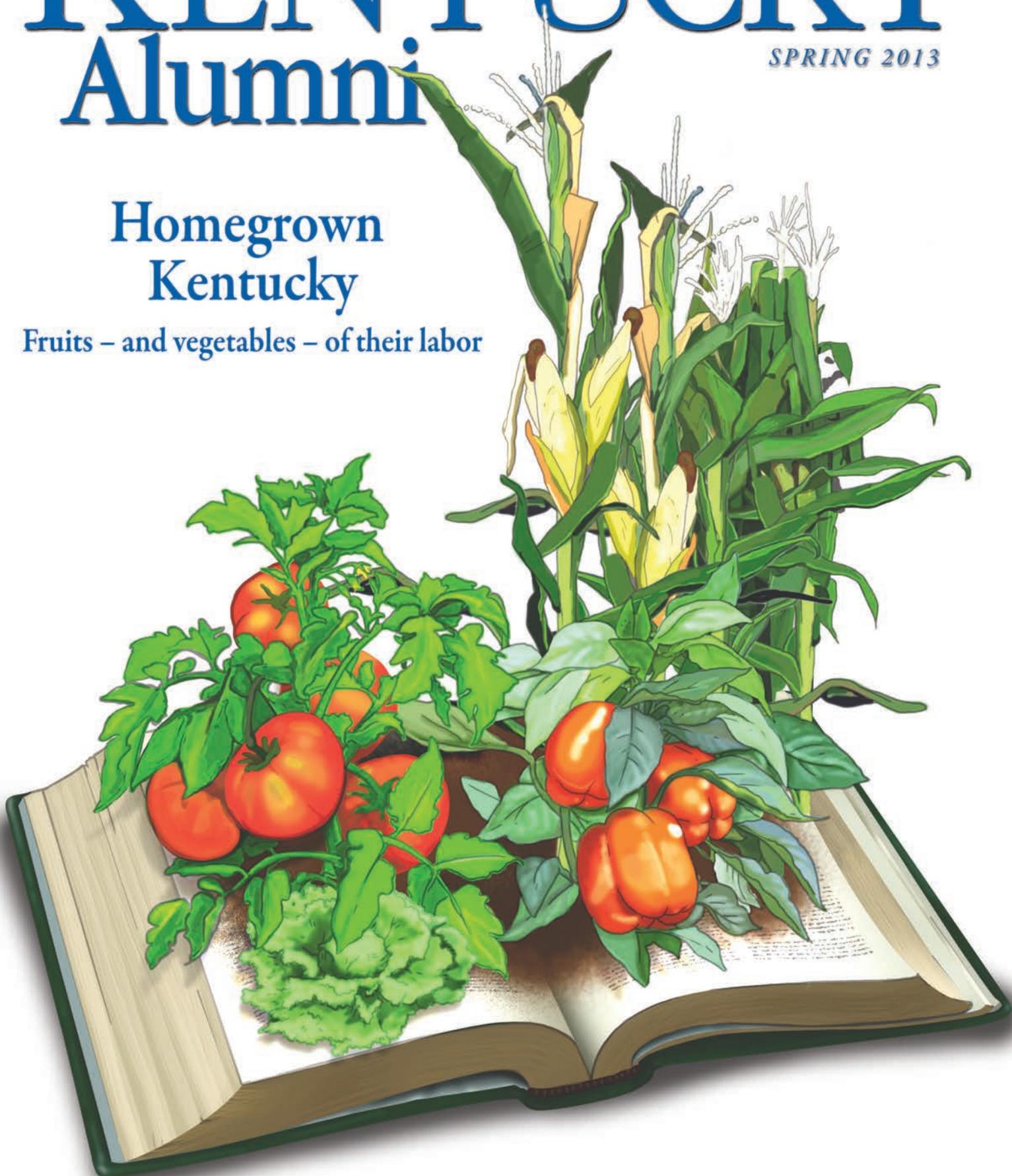
KENTUCKY

Alumni

SPRING 2013

Homegrown Kentucky

Fruits – and vegetables – of their labor





Tristan McIntosh, a student at Owsley County High School, took the lead through the farm during one of the last harvests of the year. The students grew approximately 4,000 pounds of fruits and vegetables, including 1,378 pounds of tomatoes, 910 pounds of corn and 576 pounds of watermelon. About 80 percent of the total harvest by the students was used in the school district's cafeterias.



Fruits — and vegetables — of their labor

UK student project helps community with access to fresh produce; teaches students about agriculture and business

By Linda Perry

An idea hatched by UK students for a service project in Owsley County is already reaping rewards for those local citizens and has the potential to be replicated in other communities.

What if high school students could grow fruits and vegetables to be served in their school cafeteria, providing more nutritious fresh food at a cost savings to the school system? Meanwhile, the high school students would learn valuable lessons in agriculture and business, and any excess produce could be sold at a local farmer's market. In addition, community residents could make use of the same farmland, grow produce for themselves and sell what was left over.

Initially this farm-to-school project, Homegrown Kentucky, got its inspiration in fall 2011 from the enthusiasm of several UK students, including Adam Meredith, Ben Norton, Luke McAnally, Patrick Johnson and Ben Smith, now a May 2012 graduate. The students became involved after the Clinton Global Initiative University contacted the James Stuckert UK Career Center about an essay contest it was having that had yet to see a team from the University of Kentucky participate. The contest would culminate with a conference in Washington, D.C.

McAnally, who is still involved with the project this academic year, says writers of the top 10 essays were challenged as a group with developing one innovative solution for a pressing global challenge. They had to select a topic and a region of the world to impact in a tangible way. "We started out really big, thinking

of starting a human rights institute and finding ways to curb human trafficking in Laos," he says. "But we realized people had serious issues very close to home, and a lot of the people in our group had ties to those same people. We decided to try an initiative in Eastern Kentucky."

The group, who lost some members along the way, crafted a business plan for "Homegrown Kentucky" — a small-scale fruit and vegetable farm to provide for Owsley County students — and submitted the proposal to the Clinton Global Initiative University. The UK students chose Owsley County based on its demographics, its proximity to UK, and the fact that the school also owned about 10 acres in a fertile river bottom, ideal for a garden.

The UK proposal for this pilot project competed with top schools from around the world. "Initially our idea was rejected, but due to some people not being able to attend the conference, we were allowed to go," says McAnally. Once it was announced which proposal teams would be going to the Washington, D.C., conference, former President Bill Clinton read through the proposals. "He saw merit in our idea, and we actually got to have a private audience with him," says McAnally. "The four of us met him the day we played Louisville in the Final Four, so we took him a UK Final Four T-shirt."

Returning home, the Homegrown Kentucky team either met, or had contact with, the Owsley County Board of Education, members of the local community, then vocational agriculture teacher Alan Taylor, and



Photo: Dana Rogers, UK College of Arts & Sciences

During one of the last harvests of the season, students in the Introduction to Agriculture class at Owsley County High School pick heirloom tomato varieties for next year's crop seeds, which is one of the goals for sustainable agriculture at the school farm.



Photo: Dana Rogers, UK College of Arts & Sciences

various area agencies that could partner with resources and technical support for the group, including Eastern Kentucky PRIDE, Owsley County Conservation District, Farmers State Bank and the UK Extension Service. In addition to the UK Student Government and UK Sustainability Council providing some grant money, the Homegrown Kentucky students began fundraising efforts to help see their goal materialize.

In March, the first spade of soil was turned at the new community garden.

Between the first inspiration for the project in November 2011 and the harvest throughout the early fall 2012, students who were actively involved with the project came and went. But Felisa Bowman, a UK Robinson Scholar from Owsley County, Shane Barton, program coordinator at the UK Appalachian Center, and David Ditsch, UK Extension agronomy specialist in Breathitt County and student group faculty advisor (along with Ann Kingsolver, director of the UK Appalachian Center), were at the heart of the day-to-day operation during the summer. Also heavily involved were three Owsley County high school students who received financial support from Berea College's Grow Appalachia program, and their new vocational agriculture teacher, Dustin Estridge.

"I didn't really consider it work," says Bowman, who was spending 20 hours a week during the summer as the site coordinator for Homegrown Kentucky in Owsley County. "It was really a big learning experience." Bowman, who received a UK Appalachian Center Internship stipend for her work, says she spent half her time getting everything organized and the other half in the field hoeing, weeding and stringing up heirloom tomatoes.

Bowman played a key leadership role in helping to turn the idea of a garden into reality. She had never

taken on such a huge task before but was eager to organize the everyday logistics of farm labor that was needed for tasks such as continued planting, weeding, spraying and harvesting the produce. Her go-to guy on the UK campus for anything regarding transportation issues or contact information was Barton at the Appalachian Center. "He was also there for emotional support and to lend a hand, visiting Owsley County several times, including during the harvest," Bowman says.

Working mostly unsupervised put a lot of responsibility on Bowman's shoulders, but she was determined to learn from the experience and see the project succeed. "It was amazing to be back home in my community and be part of something bigger than I knew was absolutely going to be a stepping stone to improve our county," she says.

Getting to know the local residents who were also given garden plots to provide produce for their families was an added bonus for Bowman. "I would either contact them by phone or talk to them when they were tending to their gardens," she says. "The No. 1 reason they were all taking part in the garden was that they didn't have the supplies needed or the land to actually have their own garden at home. So they utilized the school land, and the university and other various partners were able to provide them with the seed and tools they needed. Their goals were either to can produce for the winter, eat it, or share with other family members."

But the bulk of the overall produce was used by the school system, Bowman says, and the feeling she had during that first harvest was like none other she had experienced before. "There was a crazy amount of pride. It was a process that we had worked toward the entire summer and then being able to actually see what we had done pay off in the end was absolutely amazing," she says.

Ditsch, also director of the Robinson Center for Appalachian Resource Sustainability, played a pivotal role in helping Bowman with the everyday technical side of the garden. “I saw this project as an opportunity for the Robinson Center to provide expertise and equipment resources, so that the project, at least from the production point of view, was done properly and had a chance of being successful ... I was providing on-site guidance, expertise and recommendations on the production side. I took equipment over and taught them how to use it. I made it a priority to be there every day that we sprayed” says Ditsch.

But what most impressed Ditsch, he says, was how these UK students came to Eastern Kentucky and were able to get the community excited about the project and agreeable to sharing resources. “These guys didn’t come with a promise of funding, they had no expertise in horticulture or vegetable production, and they were young and full of ideas. I honestly didn’t think anybody would take them seriously,” he says. “I was dead wrong. Folks listened. They got excited. And what they probably did more successfully than anything else was that they brought people to the table who had resources and encouraged us to work together and share these resources. To me that’s the real success story.”

The benefit to the community and the school system, Ditsch says, is that they were able to keep their dollars in the county. Rather than the cafeteria purchasing processed foods from somewhere else, it was purchasing fresh foods locally — grown in the adjacent garden — and the money was going toward the Future Farmers of America at the school with the intent to provide materials for the 2013 growing season, such as seeds and fertilizer. “This wasn’t a fragmented effort. It had a focus and UK Extension played a vital role here,” says Ditsch.

Dustin Estridge, the current vocational agriculture teacher at Owsley County High School, says that the knowledge of the previous agriculture teacher, Alan Taylor, and the support of Superintendent Tim Bobrowski were instrumental in getting the project off the ground. “Alan Taylor did a marvelous job growing an abundance of plants in the OCHS greenhouse to plant in the garden. He has been involved in vegetable production for years, and brought a lot of knowledge and experience to the project,” he says.

And the impact of the project on the students is readily evident. “There is nothing more rewarding than seeing students enjoying produce in the cafeteria that was harvested in the garden that morning. It just doesn’t get fresher than that,” Estridge says. “This program has taught me that students are much more likely to eat fresh and healthy produce when they have played a role in its growth, harvest, and processing. I am seeing this project aid in our students’ development by integrating agriculture, work skills, and health education — all of which are qualities of productive, self-sufficient adults,” Estridge says.

Looking toward the next growing season, McAnally, Johnson and Bowman have recruited more UK students to be involved with Homegrown Kentucky. “We started as a pilot program hoping that we could apply it to all counties in Kentucky,” says McAnally. “We have a three year plan for each of them. The first year is when we launch. The second year we refine what we did the first year. The third year we want to leave it in the hands of the school district and at that point be able to back out and have it sustainable in their own community.”

To learn more about Homegrown Kentucky, visit homegrownkentucky.org ■

Photo: Dana Rogers, UK College of Arts & Sciences



Students in the Introduction to Agriculture class head to the field to learn about saving seed after having spent several days of classroom instruction about hybridization, heirloom and genetic modification. The fall harvest saw the students picking tomatoes, and extracting and drying seeds for preparation for planting in spring 2013. Students also saved samples of hybridized seed and will also plant those to compare germination rates between the hybridized production from the first year to the second.

Photo: Submitted



Some members of the Homegrown Kentucky team enjoyed a chance to meet President Bill Clinton, center, while working on a service project in a Washington, D.C., neighborhood last spring. It just happened to be the same day UK was playing Louisville in the Final Four, so the four UK students gave Clinton a UK Final Four T-shirt. Left to right are Patrick Johnson, Luke McAnally, Clinton, Adam Meredith and Ben Smith.