

CATALYST

RESOURCES FOR CREATIVE LIVING

Feature: Such Lovely Roots

A look at Wasatch Community Gardens' first 15 years

By Barb Guy

The unseasonable heat and the interminable walking have taken their toll; my husband and I surrender to an outdoor bar in the Piazza della Repubblica in Florence. As we peruse the menu, my husband nudges me. "Hey, look over there."

A nearby man, checking his map, is wearing a Wasatch Community Gardens T-shirt.

We walk over and say, "So you're from Salt Lake City, then?"

He looks up, surprised. "Yes I am, you too?"

I say, "Yeah, we noticed your shirt - I'm on the board there."

"You're kidding, my sister used to be the executive director," he says.

"Jane or Nini?" we ask.

"Nini," he replies, beaming.

Add this to the list of small world stories about life in Salt Lake City.

Wasatch Community Gardens, celebrating its 15th anniversary



this year, is occasionally being discussed in places as far flung as Italian piazzas.

But in the beginning, Wasatch Community Gardens could hardly have been smaller.

In the mid 1980s, the Crossroads Urban Center, directed by Jeff Fox, always on the lookout for ways to provide services to low-

income Utahns, began an effort called the Wasatch Fish and Gardens Project.

Nearly everyone the world over eats carp if they have access to it, and they appreciate it as a good-tasting, protein-rich diet staple. In the U.S., it's a "trash fish," not considered fit to eat, but Salt Lake City's hungry low-income population, many of whom at that time were refugees from Vietnam or immigrants from Eastern Europe, could benefit from a readily available, affordable source of protein. A fish co-op was born, and a community garden aspect was added, rounding out the menu for Utah's low-income population.

By 1989, Wasatch Fish and Gardens had spun off from Crossroads Urban Center and under the direction of Nick Hershenow, garnered non-profit status, a board of directors, a small budget and staff.

In 1990, Jane Torrence, barely 30 years old, became the executive director. What she lacked in administrative experience she more than made up for in charisma. Now living in New

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York, Torrence looks back on her time at Wasatch Fish and Gardens with fondness. Nini Rich, a board member at that time says, "Under Jane's leadership the garden really blossomed, because so many people cared about Jane. They wanted to help." Still a good friend of Torrence, Rich smiles at the thought of those days. "That Jane," she says, "the Gardens have such lovely roots."

Torrence was great at bringing people together; she was comfortable with people from every culture and socio-economic level, and she inspired everyone to help out in their own way.

One major success from her era, the youth gardening program, is still the crown jewel of what Wasatch Community Gardens offers, but Torrence deflects the credit, saying it could have gone either way. "Someone sits in an office and thinks up a project, thinks it would help someone else. But maybe it's not a great idea, maybe it's not gonna help anybody. It's hard to know. The youth garden is one of those great things that has really endured. It was such a naive, stupid idea."

Torrence's naive, stupid idea was that gardening is therapeutic, that it can take you away from your problems. By spending meditative time tending and

cares for something, helping it succeed and watching it grow, you can improve yourself. Young people come to the Gardens, plan and plant, water and weed, harvest and harvest, and then they take their produce to the Salt Lake City Farmers' Market. In the doing, they soak up a lot of compliments on their produce and they learn a little about commerce. Every young person is changed by the experience.

Torrence also had a flair for hosting fundraisers. One such event, "Revel With a Cause," was a blast. She says, "It was a night of carp eating. Different ethnic groups from one side of the world to the other - Vietnamese, eastern European, Japanese - made wonderful carp dishes. We had a giant fish ice sculpture, a klezmer band; it was a good time."

She goes on to say, "Erik took those parties to great heights, moving them to the [Salt Lake] Arts Center, making them bigger and better. It took a lot to support the fish co-op."

Erik Kingston, executive director from 1992 to 1994, says, "Lifetime membership in the co-op was a dollar, I think, and members could buy the carp for 18 cents a pound. It was like a taste of home for them to have this fish, one of the most commonly used food fish in the world. At one time there were a

about 1,000 members in the co-op."

Eventually, many of the members either found their way to economic prosperity or their taste in food assimilated and interest in the program dropped. Erik says, "We had experienced a lot of problems getting people from the co-op to come and help us fish. We would have to go in all weather in this rickety truck with a giant makeshift tank in the back, maybe five, six hundred gallons of water in it and we'd drive to and from Utah Lake in wet clothes in this freezing, wet truck to transport the fish. Big carp sloshing all around, it was pretty heinous. It was always staff and board members who had to go fish. It wasn't a co-op in the true sense of the members pitching in."

Torrence adds, "You haven't lived until you've caught wild carp while they're spawning - that's Wild Kingdom!"

Tom Johnson, a member of the organization's board and a volunteer who constantly contributed back-breaking labor, did an analysis of the project. They learned they were spending \$2.25 per pound to sell the carp for 18 cents. Not that they were supposed to make money, but as Kingston and Johnson concluded, there were more efficient ways they could spend their time to help the low-income

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community. They could write a few grant proposals to raise some cash, and, as Kingston says, "It would be cheaper to give people chicken from Smith's and we wouldn't have to risk our lives and spend all this time... it was an executive and board decision to refocus on community gardening."

With the fish project all but ended, Kingston and his support network did lots of planning for the future of the organization. "We'd meet at the Men's Learning Center to plan our new strategy." The MLC was really the Avenues home of Bruce Plenk, a Wasatch Fish & Gardens patron, do-good lawyer and community bon vivant. His home got the MLC moniker when Plenk, Kingston, and other male friends all found themselves no longer in marriages and relationships. Everyone was bunking in with Plenk until they got back on their feet. Kingston laughs, "Our slogan was 'Men's Learning Center - the home of men who run from women who run with wolves.' And our motto was, 'We're not like other guys - until you get to know us.'"

So while Wasatch Fish & Gardens was figuring out what to do next, they had planning meetings at the MLC.

One evening, working in the garden, Kingston discovered a two-foot-tall marijuana plant in a

garden plot. "I was there working on the drip system and I see this plant growing. It had obviously been recently transplanted. Bush One is in office, it's zero tolerance time. I'm sweating bullets. I figured that some teenagers just decided they found a great place with plenty of water. I ripped the plant out and chucked it. A couple of weeks later, I see a couple dozen pot seedlings coming up in the same plot. I'm thinking, we can't afford trouble like this. I'm not making a judgment, but if someone else finds this, we're screwed."

As Kingston made his discovery, he noted that some of the community gardeners happened to be there. "There's this Russian granny, Maria. She was 83, a fixture at the garden. I'm with my stepmom who's Russian, so I ask her to translate and we ask Maria if she has seen any strangers around, any bad teenagers, that kind of thing, because someone has begun growing marijuana in her garden plot."

Kingston goes on, "She starts jumping up and down, yelling and screaming, steam coming out of her head, and my stepmom tells me that she's saying, 'Yes, yes, I keep planting it and people keep pulling it up!' Turns out she was an herbalist in her village back home. Someone had mailed the seeds to her from Ukraine. She used them for making a salve

and for tea."

Kingston says, "I explain to her - if we get caught, they could shut down the garden, we'd be fined, we could be arrested. If I find it again, you'll have to leave the garden. She says ok. My stepmom tells me that she thinks Maria will keep growing it because back home, when the police come, you give them 10 rubles and they go away. I think Maria was finally asked to leave the garden, maybe for assaulting someone with her water bucket. I used to walk around singing, 'How do you solve a problem like Maria?'"

Worn down by the 70- and 80-hour workweeks (a schedule Kingston says has plagued every executive director of the organization), and finally in a happy place romantically, Kingston left the Gardens (and the MLC) to pursue a new direction.

Years later, living in Idaho, Kingston chats with a man while waiting for a concert to begin. It turns out they have both previously lived in Salt Lake City. They visit some more and find out they have more in common. The man Kingston was talking with was Nick Hershenow, Wasatch Fish and Gardens' founding executive director.

Another small world story about life in Salt Lake City.

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The next person at the helm was Nini Rich, sister of the guy my husband and I ran into in Italy. A board member during Kingston's time, too, Rich set about making some changes right away. In keeping with conventional thinking of the day, the board had been made up of representatives of the communities that the organization served, so they had a homeless man, a teenager, and a number of non-native English speakers, many of them very new to the U.S. and, in retrospect, far too busy and unfamiliar with their new country to serve on a board. Rich sought to change the board's makeup.

As Torrence says about Rich, "With Nini's help, they got a great board, became financially solvent and expanded their great reputation. Nini took it from financial hardship and made it ship-shape. She pays attention to details, and she's very sensitive to what people are trying to do. She doesn't ever forget the mission statement of a place where she works."

That pesky mission statement. It clearly mentioned fish.

Another big blow to the fish co-op had been the death of Sengtek Tan, a beloved volunteer turned staff member. Kingston says, "Sengtek was as close to a saint as anyone I've ever met. He was

generous and serene; he had a wonderful kind of energy about him, very conscientious. Just a wonderful guy. He'd always bring these Cambodian snacks on our fishing expeditions, these really wild homemade treats. He did so much for us - maintained the nets and everything. He was in a terrible car accident and he wound up dying several months later. It left the fisheries program in a real quandary when he left."

Everyone was heartbroken at the loss of Sengtek. This lovable man had been through so much. He had watched the Khmer Rouge gun down two of his children. Two other children were killed in a resettlement camp, and Sengtek, his wife, and their three remaining children made their way to Salt Lake City to start again. It just wasn't fair that he ended up dying after a car accident when he should have finally been safe.

With so much emotion around the fish program, Rich needed to make sure that it wasn't just ending because no one knew how to carry on without Sengtek.

Rich, who had gone on many carp fishing expeditions as a supportive board member during Kingston's era, hired a new fish manager and tried to make one last go of the project, but after months of consideration and a board retreat in the spring of 1995, the fish program officially

ended. They created a new mission statement and voted to change the name from Wasatch Fish and Gardens to Wasatch Community Gardens. Ever upbeat, Rich says, "I kind of did mouth-to-mouth on the carp, but it had already expired."

The focus on community gardening was finally firmly in place. Just in time.

The organization's flagship community garden, named the Grateful Tomato Garden by volunteer gardeners, has been on the corner of 800 South and 600 East in Salt Lake City since 1989. From the beginning, the family that owned the land had it on the market to sell, but interest was light, and they leased it to the Gardens for \$1 per year. By 1995, the real estate market had changed and houses throughout the neighborhood were being bought and spruced up. By then, the asking price for the lot was \$70,000, and the seller gave the group an option to buy it for \$65,000. The family's realtor was supportive of the group, too, and he told Rich, "Start raising money. I'll give you as much notice as I can if I get a serious buyer."

Greta deJong, publisher and editor of this fine magazine you're reading, was a board member at the time. "One potential buyer had a plan to put a very dense apartment complex

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on the property. We had no resources with which to compete. What were we going to do? Well, Catalyst was looking for an office at that time. With the ingenuity of project planner Tom Johnson, we put money down to buy the Grateful Tomato Garden with the understanding that we'd build an energy-efficient housey-looking office for Catalyst, with office and classroom space for Wasatch Community Gardens, too, and deed the rest of the land to WCG to continue as a community and/or demonstration garden."

But it wasn't meant to be. "The city wouldn't give us a variance for office space," deJong continues. "We fought it for awhile, then I found the place where we're now located. We did a story on WCG's plight..."

As Rich says, "Greta really put it to the people." Written by deJong and printed in the March 1995 issue of Catalyst, "Grateful Tomato Garden Needs You" said, in part: "On the corner of Eighth South and Sixth East is a beautiful community garden. But it has recently sprouted a realty sign. If you believe in the value of community gardens, the importance of healthy outdoor contemplative activity in an inner-city setting, and saving a bit of land already recognized for its social, cultural and spiritual value, then you must act now. You are desperately needed... Stop what

you are doing and write out a check... Mention this project to your friends. Discuss it with your colleagues, your kids, your church group. Together we can be the community that bought a garden for Earth Day 1995. An additional pleasure of this project is that you'll see exactly where your money goes. And it will stay there forever and ever."

Rich tells the next bit:

"Donations started coming in. The U's Bennion Center volunteers held a concert - some kind of heavy metal show. They made a huge effort, probably raised about \$2,000.

"Then, Lincoln Elementary, one of the poorest schools in Salt Lake, had been regularly walking over for field trips. When they found out that we might lose the garden, there was a group of about six sixth graders, kids who were in this special class because they were always in trouble, that came up with a plan to lead the entire school in a three-day fundraiser. The kids developed this whole plan - their goal was to raise \$1,000. They wanted the different grades to compete against each other to see who could bring in the most spare change. I thought it was very touching and cute and not possible. I mean, here's this school where nearly all the students qualify for free lunch. They invited me to come and meet with them to kick off the

project. So I told the students I'd give a pizza party to the winning grade. First Interstate Bank said they would match the \$1,000 if the students raised it."

Rich continues, "The teacher called me and said, 'You need to come pick up this money.' It was in tennis ball cans, fish bowls, industrial tomato sauce cans; mostly change - pennies, nickels, dimes, quarters. I literally was dumping it out on the manager's desk at First Interstate. Those kids raised \$2,300 in three days. It really energized everyone. The woman at the bank, what was she going to do? If First Interstate Bank couldn't match \$2,300 from these kids, the poorest school in town, what was she going to do? She had to match it.

"Catalyst readers and our member mailing list were great. We were about \$18,000 short of our goal in 1996 when the realtor called saying, 'I'm presenting a good cash offer tomorrow and I think it will be accepted.'"

On the eve of losing the garden, after a solid year of fundraising and being in crisis mode, an anonymous business owner came forward to help. She said that she wouldn't buy the garden for the group, but would help how she could. She believed that the community was supportive of the project, but she could see that Rich was about to run out of time. She asked Rich what was

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needed to ensure the garden's future. Rich, being as specific as she could, told the woman, "I need an \$18,000 loan, interest-free, in cash, the day after tomorrow. We'll pay it back in a year, on Earth Day." Amazingly, the woman agreed, and without so much as a written agreement or a signature the money was handed over.

Rich says, "It was all on faith. We considered it quite a miracle. We eventually paid her back; it took a little longer than Earth Day." No one but Rich has ever known the identity of the woman.

In a delightful coda to the story, Rich recalls, "After we got the garden, I was weeding there one evening and a kid whipped by on her bike and called out, 'We saved your garden.' She just kept going and I hollered after her, 'Thanks!'"

Today, the executive director of WCG is Don Anderson, a man who comes to the job with a lifetime of experience in the nonprofit world and specific expertise in fundraising. He took over a little more than a year ago from Michael Mozdy who did a two-year stint after Rich.

It's another time of growth for the Gardens, so Anderson's skills are in demand. A small greenhouse learning center is being planned for the Grateful Tomato Garden. Great care was

taken to design a building with a very small footprint, well back from the street, impacting as little of the garden space as possible. Anderson says, "We're on our way with the approval process and Wayne [Bingham, board member and architect] has done a great job of making the building recessive so that it won't dominate the garden and making it fit in with the neighborhood's rather eclectic architecture. We want to maintain as open a feeling as possible on the corner. Our capital campaign is underway - we're hoping to construct the building in October."

The goal of the capital campaign is to raise \$100,000 - \$85,000 for the greenhouse learning center and the rest for landscaping, furnishings and computers. So far, only \$11,000 is in hand, but several grant proposals are pending and special fund-raising events are planned. The main event for Wasatch Community Gardens is the annual plant sale, scheduled this year for May 15.

The building, a passive solar greenhouse constructed from plastered straw bales, will be built by community members who sign up for workshops. Participants will learn the technique, which is environmentally friendly, energy-efficient, and well-suited to the do-it-yourselfer on a budget. Workshop fees will help fund the

capital campaign.

"The greenhouse learning center will be a place where classes can take place in spite of the weather," says Anderson. "It's going to be the heart of the garden. I think we'll find that it will become a gathering place, a place to start seeds, a place for the community gardeners as well as the youth, and a place where we can have all kinds of informal events."

Of course, the informal event of each year's social season, the Grateful Tomato Party, is always held in the garden, early in September. Supporters come by, admire the garden, have an amazingly delicious tomato sandwich, listen to live music, meet some of the gardeners and maybe buy a T-shirt.

Torrence, Kingston, Rich, and Anderson all point to the youth program as the biggest success of Wasatch Community Gardens. Anderson says, "Our most positive program is the youth program and it consumes the most of our resources - it's key to our mission."

As to the circuitous route the organization has taken to find their mission, Anderson laughs and says, "The human mind always figures out the most complex solution first; then we have to spend a few years boiling it down."

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Each executive director I interviewed was eager to mention a list of heroic people whom they couldn't have run the garden without. It made me wonder, how many people are out there who have contributed money, work and ideas to this community treasure? And how many people have benefited? As someone collecting stories for the organization, I'm curious. We'll never be able to hear from everyone, but maybe some of you will whiz past on your bikes and let us know.

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