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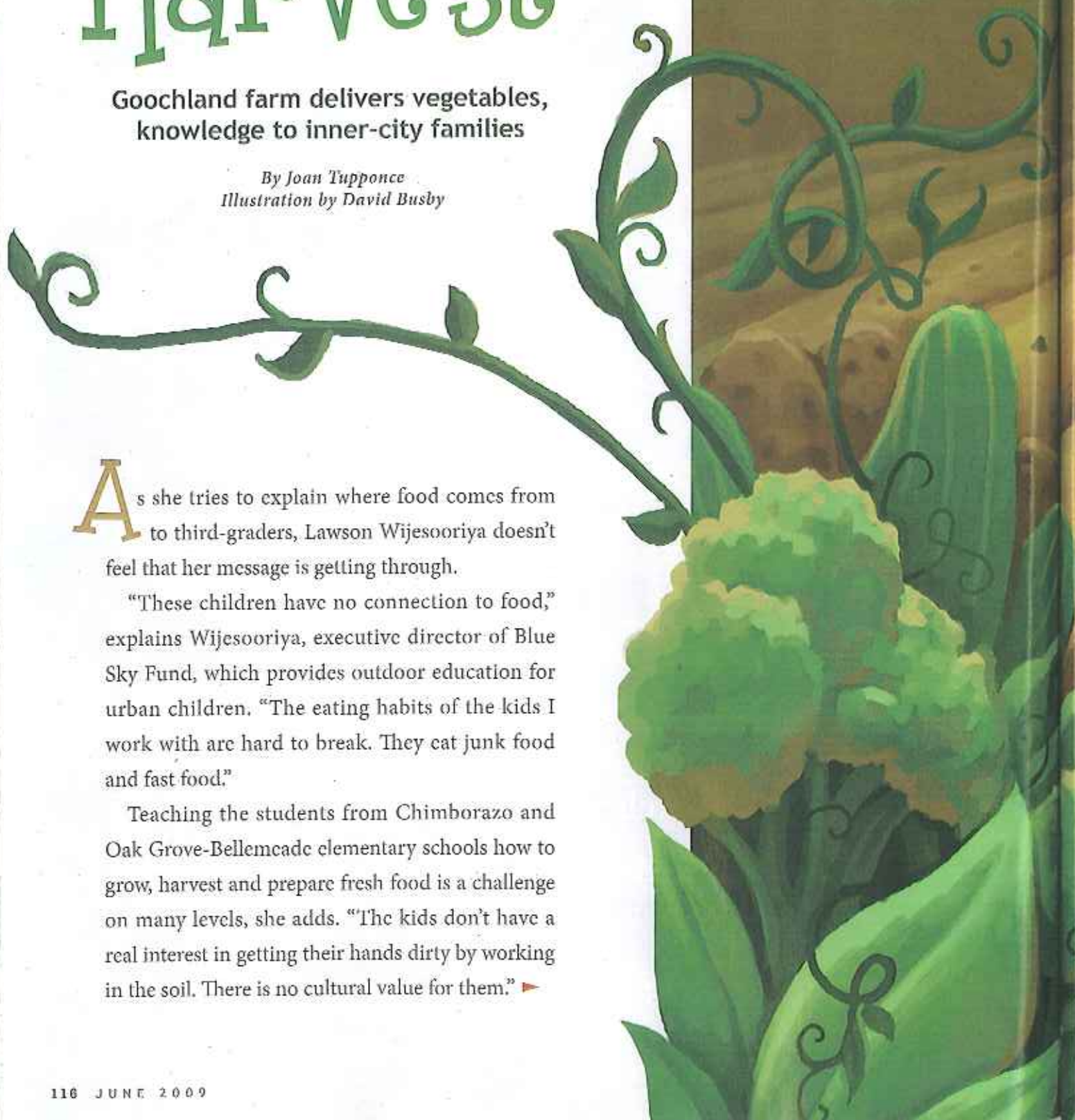
Goochland farm delivers vegetables,
knowledge to inner-city families

By Joan Tupponce
Illustration by David Busby

As she tries to explain where food comes from to third-graders, Lawson Wijesooriya doesn't feel that her message is getting through.

"These children have no connection to food," explains Wijesooriya, executive director of Blue Sky Fund, which provides outdoor education for urban children. "The eating habits of the kids I work with are hard to break. They eat junk food and fast food."

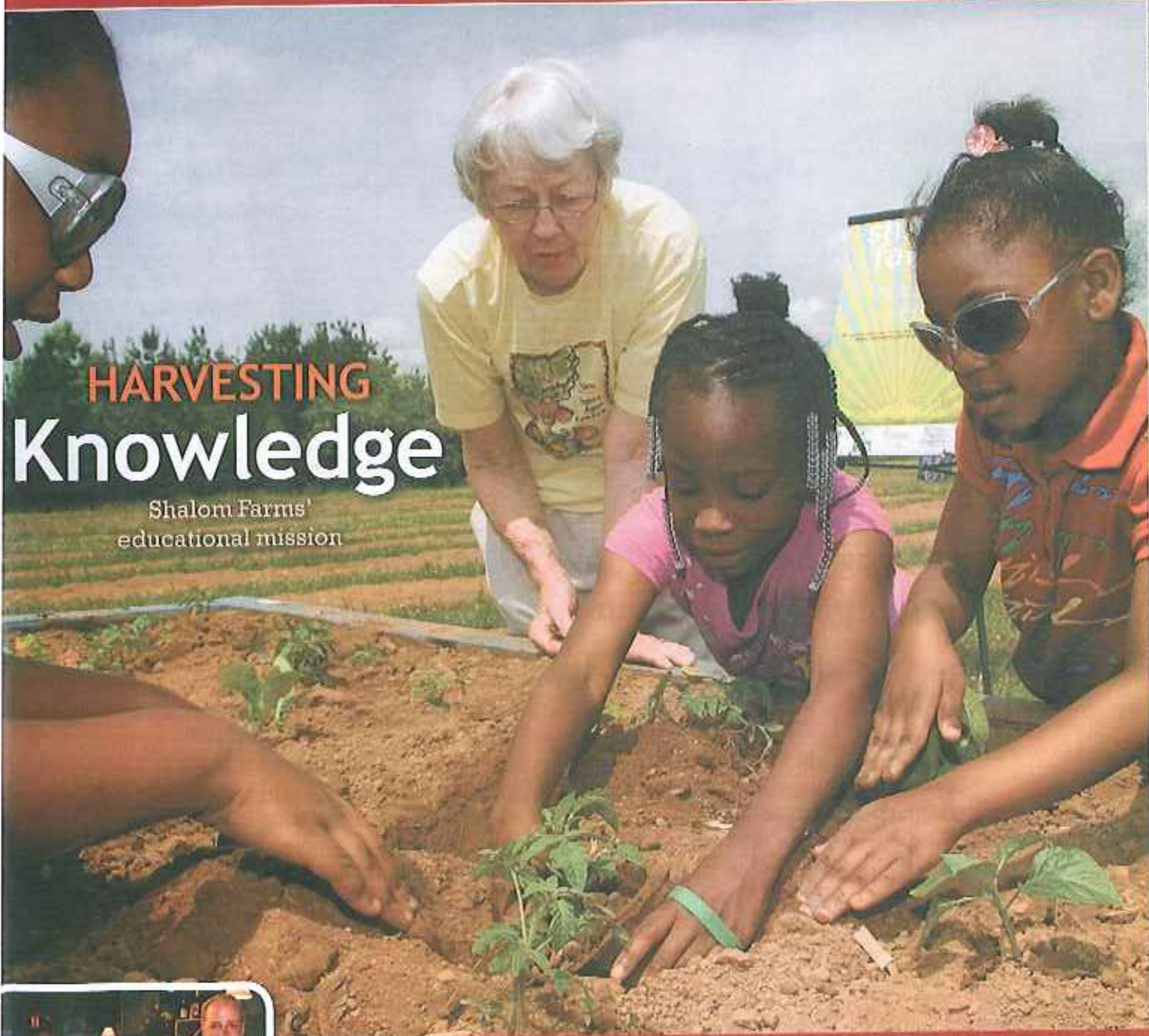
Teaching the students from Chimborazo and Oak Grove-Bellemeade elementary schools how to grow, harvest and prepare fresh food is a challenge on many levels, she adds. "The kids don't have a real interest in getting their hands dirty by working in the soil. There is no cultural value for them." ▶





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HARVESTING Knowledge

Shalom Farms'
educational mission



Sunset Grill Arises

Goochlanders remember the late Red Oak Café,
while welcoming its replacement. >> p.110

Presented by
Richmond
magazine
Summer 2009



From left: Këndasia Woolridge, Charlotte Croft, Tykia Graves and Yeasiah Woolridge dig in the dirt at Shalom Farms' ground-breaking.

But all of that may change when the students are introduced to Shalom Farms, a faith-based project developed by the United Methodist Urban Ministries of Richmond and the Virginia Cooperative Extension. Situated on the grounds of Westview on the James in western Goochland County, Shalom Farms has three missions: To increase access to healthy foods in the inner city, to build community and to improve the self-sufficiency of the people it serves.

Shalom is the brainchild of the Rev. David Cooper, executive director of the Methodist ministries, and Jonah Fogel, community-viability specialist at the extension. The idea for the farm came up two years ago, when members of the board of directors of Camp Westview, a 780-acre United Methodist camp at Westview on the James, wanted to find ways to use the property to help inner-city families. Cooper mentioned farming to the board, but

his idea didn't generate a lot of interest at the time. "About 18 months later, the economy went into a freefall, and the directors decided to revisit the garden approach," Cooper says. The project held its ground-breaking ceremony May 2.

Wijesooriya has taken the Richmond third-graders, as well as some of their grandparents, to Camp Westview as part of her organization's Blue Sky Explorers environmental-education program. Though the children were reluctant to dig in the "dirty" soil, this was in sharp contrast to their grandparents, who seemed very comfortable in the farming environment. "That's when I realized that the generational distance away from farming is quite short," Wijesooriya says.

Shalom Farms' first goal is to grow and harvest fruits and vegetables for families in three target neighborhoods — Hillside Court, Oregon Hill and Church Hill. "There

are no grocery stores in these areas," Cooper says. "The people have limited access to fresh, local produce. We want to introduce them to and teach them the value of using local produce. We would also like to reduce their consumption of processed foods and increase their consumption of fresh, healthy, locally grown food."

Cooper and Fogel hope to teach children and adults about gardening, nutritious eating and food preservation. "David was originally interested in making sure people have the food that they need to stay healthy and be fed," says Fogel. "From our perspective at the VCE, we were looking for community capacity building, self-sufficiency skills and healthy eating. We also wanted people to learn skills to grow their own food."

In its first year, the farm will use up to two acres of its fields to grow 10 crops — green soybeans, snap beans, Irish potatoes,



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sweet potatoes, squash, bell peppers, okra, broccoli, cucumbers and watermelon. The crops should produce 16,000 pounds of fresh food.

The Central Virginia Foodbank will provide the transportation and refrigeration needed to pick up the produce from the farm, transport it to the food bank and then get the food to the three neighborhoods. "We are structuring it so that we can measure the impact of the farm," says Rick Holzbach, food-resource manager for the food bank. "We will have a network of partner agencies identified in the three neighborhoods. As the crops come in, we will know which facilities are distributing the food that day."

This will be a first for the food bank. "We've distributed a lot of fresh produce but never have had anyone that measured the impact," Holzbach says. "At the end of the year, we'll share the results."

Shalom Farms will use volunteers to help plant and harvest the food. In April and early May, the organization had about 180 volunteers, including a group of teens from the Armstrong High School Leadership program, Bonner Scholars from around the state, Engineering Students Without Borders from the University of Virginia, and United Methodist youth groups.

"Food is a community-building phenomenon that all kinds of people are willing to rally around," says Katye Parker Snipes, community developer and volunteer coordinator for the Methodist ministries. "When you start talking about feeding people, teaching children and digging in the dirt, there are few people I've met who aren't interested on one level or another."

"Gardens Growing Families," the educational curriculum being developed for the project and other community-gardening efforts, will tie into the Standards of Learning. Goochland field agent Eric Bowen and 4-H agent Jocelyn Dailey, along with Henrico field agent Lisa Sanderson, will be working with adults and children at the farm to help them learn to grow, store and preserve food, while also teaching them how to cook nutritionally. "They will be leading the charge on the production of the food in conjunction with Virginia State

University," says Fogel. "They've chosen the crops for their nutritional value as well as their cultural value."

The education piece will also include information on how to make money by selling fruits and vegetables through farmers' markets. "The number of farmers' markets in the area has doubled since last year," Fogel notes. "We can't always find vendors for the markets."

Cooper hopes that this information will filter back to various inner-city neighborhoods. "We'd like to see them creating community gardens and community cooking projects," Cooper says. "It is our intent that we partner with other organizations that could help provide support for local neighborhood community gardens."

Leona Baylor, who works as a truancy case manager for the Richmond Police Department in Hillside Court, is also a Girl Scout Troop leader in the neighborhood. She plans to take the girls out to Shalom Farms to work and has gotten buy-in from their parents. "They see it as a nice way for everyone to pitch in."

She also hopes to encourage the girls in her troop and other neighborhood residents to start gardening. "Every little bit helps," she observes. "This is an excellent opportunity to have a garden in the community. It would be an added benefit to working families."

Community activist Bob Argabright will be working with Baylor in Hillside Court to start a garden. He knows it will be a challenge. "These children have never been involved in a garden," he says. "They have no concept of where things come from. They've never seen them growing."

The children he works with at Oak Grove-Bellemeade think that all food comes from the grocery store. "I tell them, 'Yes, it does, but somebody had to grow it first.'"

Shalom Farms can't change children's perceptions overnight, nor can it instantly affect people's eating habits. But what organizers do hope is that it can inspire other organizations to start similar programs around the region, increasing the impact it has on communities. Holzbach sees the program as "more than a 16,000-pounds target. It will impact hunger going forward." ■



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