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How Does Their Garden Grow? Very Well, Say Junior Farmers at Bronx Science

By SAMUEL G. FREEDMAN

WHEN Maya Divack got down to choosing a college earlier this spring, she called her admissions officer at Beloit. She had been admitted by three liberal-arts schools, and now it was time to split the proverbial hairs. On the other end of the telephone in Wisconsin, Ari Hurwitz was accustomed to the drill. There were always lingering questions about study abroad or internships or double majors or, of course, financial aid.

Maya, however, wanted to know about opportunities to farm. Mr. Hurwitz had to admit it wasn't exactly the topic he'd been expecting, not from a senior at the Bronx High School of Science, a city girl who had spent all 17 years of her life in an apartment on Riverside Drive and for most of that time thought of the "back 40" as the produce section of Fairway. Heck, her application said she was planning to major in dance.

Disguising his surprise, Mr. Hurwitz nimbly mentioned that an English professor ran an organic farm with her husband, and they usually took on student helpers. Beloit was even offering a freshman seminar in the Slow Food Movement. Thus reassured, Maya committed to Beloit.

Dina Brewster has that kind of effect on people. Ms. Brewster had taught Maya and 30 other classmates horticulture over the past year at Bronx Science, and in so doing she had changed the direction of more than one student's life. Kate Barut was bound for the University of Michigan with the ambition of designing a major in sustainable agriculture and community development. Cherry Qiuxia Chen was going to Unity College in Maine, a school specializing in environmental science, to take up landscape horticulture. And the rest, setting aside microscope and calculator at least temporarily, had learned how to make things grow.

Now let us be clear here. We are talking about Bronx Science, not Bronx A & M, a school renowned for having produced six Nobel laureates, all in physics, and 200 national winners in the Westinghouse and Intel science competitions. The mosaic in the center hall celebrates Archimedes, Galileo, Curie, that crew. Ms. Brewster's students have spiked hair, nose rings, peroxide streaks, black nail polish, capri pants, Converse high-tops and eyebrows pierced with safety pins, ever so Sid Vicious. In other words: not exactly the 4-H Club.

"I couldn't imagine it would work out," Maya admitted. "I was skeptical that we could actually get vegetables to pluck off a vine. I figured, maybe we'll get vines but no peas. Or the lettuce would be inedible."

She was not the only doubter. Cherry's mother grew up on a farm in southern China and immigrated to New York precisely so her children would never know such toil. "She lectures me all the time: 'You're going to college four years to be a farmer?'" Cherry said. "My sister is always trying to explain to her that you can be very successful in landscape horticulture."

Ms. Brewster knows better than most the allure of the soil. The daughter of a college president, a product of Exeter and Yale, she discovered it 13 years ago, when her family moved onto her grandparents' farm in Ridgefield, Conn., which had lain fallow for more than a decade. Dina and her father, Carroll Brewster, newly retired from the presidency of Hobart and William Smith Colleges in upstate New York, together cleared the land, and set about burning off 15 acres of brush.

The resulting blaze required several fire companies to quell and put the neophytes on the front page of the hometown newspaper. "It was like, 'Yuppies burn down farm,'" Ms. Brewster recalled with chagrin. "We were the local joke." The fiasco, though, captured the attention of an experienced farmer, Otto Gravesen, who called up the Brewsters to say: "Thanks for the ash. I'll see you in the summer."

That summer of 1992, Mr. Gravesen began transforming the scorched land into fields of eggplants, potatoes, corn, tomatoes and blueberries. In the process, he became perhaps the most influential teacher in Dina Brewster's life.

"I saw the kinds of intelligence that aren't so valued in our society - handiness, the ability to fix things - and I was awed by it," said Ms. Brewster, who is 29. "People like Otto know how to read the world in the way people in the other circles of my life don't. They could read the water and read the grass the way other people read books."

"I never had a sense of accomplishment in school the way I did on the farm," she continued. "It's not just the harvest; it's looking at a perfectly harrowed field and knowing all the work that stands behind it."

AFTER graduating from Yale with a degree in English literature, earning a master's from Teachers College and spending two years in the Philippines as a Peace Corps volunteer, Ms. Brewster landed at Bronx Science in early 2002, ostensibly as a substitute. She quickly demonstrated acumen outside the usual areas. She took eggs from her farm to the school secretaries, and when students set loose a few chickens in the halls for an end-of-year prank, she was the one staff member who knew the correct way to snag the birds, sneaking up from behind.

While Ms. Brewster's certification was in English, she was permitted to teach one class in a different subject, and last spring she decided to make it horticulture. Bronx Science actually had two greenhouses that had been used for such a course in the past, but they had gone to dishevelment since the last horticulture teacher had retired five years earlier. One was used for storing stage sets from school plays. Ms. Brewster persuaded the principal to let her conscript students serving detention to help clear it on the pretext of "community service."

In that revived greenhouse, amid the steam pipes and air vents of the Bronx Science roof, Ms. Brewster led this year's class in sowing and

growing aloe, peas, basil, radishes and tomatoes. She taught the plant science of cell structure, fertilization and photosynthesis. She addressed the political issues of agriculture, like organic farming and genetically modified organisms.

When it came time last week to administer the final exam, Ms. Brewster asked each student to devise a plan to "save the planet and feed its population," a brain-stretcher worthy of Bronx Science. Then, on the last day of class, she came with her parting present, or maybe it was more of a legacy: seeds for mesclun greens, sugar snap peas, nasturtium flowers.

As the bell rang and her protégés dispersed, she was still calling out, "If there's anyone who needs more seeds..."

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