

Keeping Us Eating Local

Everyone wants to change the world, but no one knows where to start. As sophomores in the Academy for Global Studies who just returned from a learning expedition in Costa Rica—the trip of a lifetime—we all had acquired that inspiration to make a difference. During our excursion, we spent some of our days with the indigenous Bribri people, and also visited the La Palma Finca, a large farm where we met the kind owner Doña Rosa. What she and the Bribri people have in common is that they are each self-dependent. They both grow their own food for their own use. So when our teachers gave us the opportunity to choose an issue to address, our group was eager to explain the benefits of sustainable agriculture back home. But how would we make an issue like this applicable to Austin? When we got back home, we quickly realized that the most effective way to do this was to promote the act of local consumption of locally-produced food. Thus, K.U.E.L., or Keeping Us Eating Local, was born.

The first step was to educate ourselves on this issue. And on the first day back from our trip, we discovered some shocking facts about major food companies that highlight the importance of consuming locally-produced food.

Environmentally, the current systems and practices for the production of foods are on unsustainable paths. The consumer also contributes toward these paths of unsustainability. By shopping at supermarkets, and purchasing food from large corporations, buyers are supporting poor environmental practices. For example, corporate buyers of beef generally obtain their meat from suppliers that systematically cut down the Amazon rainforest to create vast cattle ranches. This practice is responsible for 80 percent of the deforestation of the Amazon rainforest (Butler). It's incredibly important to preserve the Amazon rainforest because taking away this forest results in an increase of CO₂, a greenhouse gas, in the atmosphere, and in the elimination of the biodiversity that helps find new cures for diseases (WWF).

Not only does the current, unsustainable food production system created by major food companies damage the environment, it also creates medical problems for the American public. A 2006 study published in the *Journal of Public Health Policy* has found that up to \$10 billion is spent annually by major food companies to promote unhealthy foods to children. Major food companies also fund groups such as the Center for Consumer Freedom (CCF) that lobby against anti-obesity laws and initiatives, including ones that aim to remove junk food from schools (Voiland and Haupt).

The problems with adhering to, facilitating, and financing an unsustainable system don't stop at politics and the environment. The food found in grocery stores can have a direct impact on the health of humans. For instance, Monsanto is the world's largest seed company, and its products can be found in supermarkets all across the nation (Schwartz). Their genetically-modified crops are maintained with pesticides that cause kidney disease for those who live in the areas where the crops are grown. More than 16,000 deaths in Central America can be attributed to chronic kidney disease caused by exposure to harmful pesticides (Bandarage). These health issues have a negative economic impact as well, driven by an increase in demand for medical care.

Even though this information shocked us and made us even more determined to make a difference, we still had to ask ourselves, “what does this have to do with Austin? How can we make a difference in something that is happening thousands of miles away?” The answer is actually right here at home. It’s eating locally. Finally our group knew exactly what to do. We had to show everyone the importance of knowing what they’re eating, and understanding how important it is to support local food production and consumption, and that doing such would mitigate the negative effects of mass production by major food companies. The solution is centered on Austin’s farmers markets.

With further research, the benefits of shopping at farmers markets became clear. Primarily, the carbon footprint is drastically lowered because the food comes from a short distance away rather than being trucked or railed for hundreds or thousands of miles. In fact, shopping at farmers markets can reduce the amount of fossil fuels used by up to 90 percent since nearly all of the energy used in the world’s current agribusiness system comes from transportation of the food (Hand). Additionally, local farmers do not use the same environmentally hazardous practices that major food companies and large corporate farms do. “Our farm practices sequestration of carbon, [which is] leaving roots in the ground, [and] making our own compost. We are good for the environment,” said Carol Anne Style, owner of Boggy Creek Farm in Austin. “Small, local farmers are more interested in environmental issues. Giant corporate farms are interested mostly in the bottom line.” Local farmers encourage healthier production practices, such as organic or pesticide free (Exner). Moreover, supporting farmers markets also helps the economy. In 2011, the Austin Food Sector brought to Austin over \$63 million in tax revenue, 43,000 jobs, and over \$4 billion in economic output (City of Austin).

With an evident problem and a clear solution, it was now time for us to take action. What we wanted to do was craft a unique way for us, and eventually the community at large to support and promote farmers markets. We called our ground-game plan the “Three-Pronged Approach,” symbolized by a farmer’s pitchfork.

The first step, or “prong,” was the act of volunteering at the local farmers’ market. We did this to directly help out the farmers, get to know them, and facilitate the selling of their produce, thus supporting them. As part the “Three-Pronged Approach,” we urged others, including our fellow students, to come out to the farmers market and participate. Early one Saturday morning, we drove to Barton Creek Mall to volunteer at the weekly Barton Creek Farmers Market. There we met Anya Whaley, who taught us the ways of the vendors. She directed us, showing us who needed the most help setting up their stall. This allowed us to meet many different people, all with different stories, and offering various products.

We also engaged Alexa Senter, the director for Hope Farmers Market in Austin. She directly works with both the vendors and the community, the “go-to Gal” for vendor or programming-related inquiries about the market. Hope Farmers Market, or Hope FM, isn’t just a farmer’s outlet, rather, it’s a showcase: they incorporate live music and educational seminars into the market. “We always point out that Hope combines food, music and art,” she explained. “It has more of a feel of a flea market than farmers market. We also have a great music program called ‘HOPE FM Live’ which helps promote up-and-coming local bands. The cool part about Austin’s local farms is that there is such a wide variety. We have large farms like Johnson’s Backyard Garden which grows a wide range of things, we have

Engel Farms in Fredricksburg [which] mostly focuses on peaches and field crops (tomatoes, greens, strawberries) and then we have Wildsprout who is made up of one girl growing microgreen sprouts in her backyard!" Volunteering isn't the only way to support farmers markets; a person who wants to make a difference can buy the farmer's produce. "Come to the market, meet the vendors, [and] buy their products!" Senter said.

The second "prong" was adding to the school garden. It can't get any more local than that! This was an important aspect of our cause because it sends a message to our peers that local foods can be fun, and really cool. We wanted to show that participating in a sustainable lifestyle was something that could be done easily, and we urged others to make or add to the gardens at their schools. What we made was simple and effective. Early one Saturday morning we found an empty space behind the portables. We dug out the weeds, and planted various fruit and vegetable plants. We even planted a melon! By the afternoon, we had converted a patch of brush and weeds into a functioning garden. We created four plots for plants with each plot made from old bicycle tires, and in total, the project cost less than ten dollars.

The final step or third "prong" involved working on the farm itself. The purpose of this "prong" was to help the farmer in a personal way, and educate ourselves and see what sustainable ways of producing food look like. Some of our group members went out to Munkebo Farms where they met owner Germaine Swenson. She, of course, shared the same sentiment we did about local farms. "I feel the importance is keeping of money in the community, from the buying of materials to the selling of our actual products," she pointed out. "We have relationships with the people we do business with the whole way through." We toured the farm and handled the livestock. As with every part of our approach, we encouraged everyone to meet the farmers in their area, and come to understand why it's important to maintain a sustainable lifestyle.

By creating an actionable model to educate the community and promote the consumption of locally-produced food, the K.U.E.L. organization took the initial steps toward mitigating the adverse effects of the current food production system. Now, we call on everyone to participate in supporting farmers markets. We should all do our part by volunteering at farmers markets, creating gardens to support local foods at school, and actually getting to know our farmers by meeting them, and understanding what a sustainable lifestyle really is. We have learned that what we eat has a huge effect on the planet. And it is our choice whether or not that effect can be sustainable and positive, or continue to be both economically and environmentally harmful. With the "Three-Pronged Approach," we want everyone to get on board with a cause that can create a bright, livable future for everyone.

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