



Photos courtesy Finca Tres Robles and Luke Brawner

# FINCA TRES ROBLES: URBAN EDUCATIONAL AGRICULTURE

by Daniel, Thomas, and Mark Garcia-Prats

With little Annete dropped off at preschool, Vicente Acuña, Janette Carballo, and their two year old make the quick half-mile drive down the block to Finca Tres Robles, our 1.5-acre urban farm in Houston's Second Ward. A breeze rustles through the three large oak trees, a mix of English and Spanish chatter can be heard as they join the other parents in our Community Farm Share Program. Through a collaboration with Ninfa Laurenzo Early Childhood Center, the local HISD preschool, and the Houston Food Bank, parents like Vicente and Janette receive weekly bags of our fresh produce sponsored by community members and one Friday each month they gather for a cooking class to share a laugh, a moment, and a meal together at their community farm. Vicente is typically the only father but he and Janette have prioritized attending together for their family, a choice that is deeply personal—Janette is eating for two.

Four years ago, when we began Finca Tres Robles, we were constantly asked why we would start a 1.5-acre farm in the city, instead of finding 100 acres at the rural periphery of Houston. For most, this idea had no rationale because the only value much of society sees in agriculture is the food it produces. What would be the point of a small farm when it could only produce a fraction of the food?

Our motivations for starting a farm are founded in a deep responsibility and care for the people and place where we live. Large parts of the Second Ward are food deserts where many residents lack access to fresh healthy food options within a reasonable distance from their homes. Our time, energy, and commitment have been focused on building impactful relationships between the farm and the community in which we serve; almost every school within two miles of the farm has been out for a field trip. We've worked with Austin High School students to build community gardens at three elementary

schools. Through a Texas Department of Agriculture grant, Community Family Centers has been purchasing fresh produce from us for meals prepared in the cafeteria for preschoolers attending their Los Niños Early Childhood Montessori Program. We have had AARP sponsor free gardening and cooking classes for the community. Local small businesses including Chocolate Wasted Ice Cream, Sipping Sisters Fermentation, and Metal Rain Tanks have taught classes on the farm to share their trade and professional expertise. We have played host to dance performances, poetry readings, concerts, weddings, birthdays, pop-up dinners, and community potlucks. The farm has become a central hub.

During a 1995 presentation to a group of Houston public school teachers, Dr. James Comer, the noted child psychologist and education pioneer said, "No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship." For years, Dr. Comer promoted

the idea that a child's academic learning goes hand-in-hand with their emotional and social development. If educators want students to acquire math and reading skills, teachers must find a way to integrate students' emotional and social development along with those academic skills. For Dr. Comer, the epicenter of learning is the relationship between educator and student. When a student feels she knows and can trust her teacher, only then will a student allow him or herself to be challenged and changed.

While central to everything we do, food is just one aspect of our farm. In communities where individuals have grown increasingly disconnected from one another, the implications of Dr. Comer's statement are profound. In our communities, just like in our classrooms, first comes the relationship, then the learning. The power of a community lies in its capacity to learn about its own challenges and resources (whether material or skill or knowledge), and to effectively leverage those resources to address the challenges. But, all of this depends on how well we know and trust each other. Do I know my neighbor's name? Can I call them if I need an extra hand? Would I respond if he called? Do I trust them enough to share my telephone number? Do I know what her talents are? Is he an electrician?

Before a community can begin to address the complex problems of health, education, just wages, and affordable housing—just to name a few—it first needs its residents to know one another's names, to share a meal, and to laugh.

Farming, especially in the organic realm, is the practice of managing relationships—the bugs to the soil, the soil to the plants, the



microbes to the roots, the weather to the pests, trees to the animal life. These relationships are intrinsically dependent upon the place in which they are located. The topography, the climate, the soil content, the native plants, all together, create an intricate, interconnected ecosystem. Each farm becomes a unique design that develops in reciprocity to its place, ultimately defining the farm. However, the most important relationship in agriculture has been abandoned—the relationship to people.

For many, there is a fundamental misunderstanding of agriculture as primarily about plants. Agriculture is not about plants, but about people. Our relationship with food has changed significantly over the past century, as agriculture has been removed from our communities, pushed to the fringes

**“Agriculture is not about plants, but about people. Humans began domesticating plants 10,000 years ago in order to provide a stable source of food for themselves and their families, leaving behind nomadic hunting and gathering which had defined human reality up to that point in our history.”**



of our urban society to accommodate larger production capacities and mechanization.

Those of us who live in urban areas sometimes mourn the loss of the “small town” feel. We long for the days when we could leave our doors unlocked and when everyone knew everyone. These sentiments reflect a loss or destruction of the sense of community, but ignore the responsibility we share in that destruction. At its core, the small town is fundamentally based on the connectivity of the community and the realization that interdependence is a way of life. There is one elementary school, one high school, one grocery store, one ice cream parlor. This interdependence is far from unique to small towns. In a city where the vast majority of people no longer work and live in the same community, large chains dominate our consumer options, and fewer students attend local schools, our experience of interdependence is subject to choice.

Different movements across the United States have sprung up in a response to this lack of connectivity: buying local, promoting walkable/bikeable streets, complete communities, etc. These are the manifestation of the growing recognition of the tremendous value of relationships, and our responsibility to invest more fully in these relationships. These movements seek to facilitate the growing demand for connectivity and provide choices that positively impact our communities. Quantifying these impacts has been the focus of researchers like Dr. Doug Schuler, Associate Professor of Business and Public Policy at Rice University, who has spent the past several years analyzing various food desert interventions. This past year, Dr. Schuler and his students worked with us to begin quantifying the impacts of Finca Tres Robles, especially of our Ninfa Lorenzo Community Farm Share Program. They estimate that four years of this joint food access and education initiative alone could save between \$220,000 and \$1,250,000 in obesity related healthcare costs.

These health savings just scratch the surface of the potential value community focused urban farms afford. Their benefits ripple out beyond the farm's edges, reaching into the neighborhood to provide employment and economic opportunities, address environmental and air quality concerns, reduce and divert organic waste from landfills, and contribute to ecosystem services like stormwater management just to name a few.

This is why we at Finca Tres Robles believe agriculture should take a leading role in Houston. What we love about agriculture is the diversity of connections and intersections. For our ancient ancestors, food production became the cornerstone upon which all aspects of culture were built—arts, economics, sport, science, technology. Food production can once again be the cornerstone upon which we build a new culture and identity for Houston.

What excites us most is that Houston can do something no other city its size can do—not New York, Chicago, or L.A.—and make agriculture a fundamental part of our city. This city can provide the opportunity to develop a new urban vision founded on connectivity, localized choice, and an understanding of the interdependence of community, centered around a meaningful cultural exchange found through agriculture. The farm is our investment in the health and future of Vicente, Janette, and their young, growing family. Working to make agriculture accessible to our community isn't just business, it's personal.