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## Students Cultivate Relationships, Gardens Locally and Across the Globe

By Lou Fancher



Campolindo High School students with environmental science teacher Tren Kauzer (bottom center) at organic garden. Photo provided

It is possible there is nothing more "we are the world" than a garden. After all, Mother Nature's "invisibles" - worms and slugs and imagined crawly things - must till the soil. Older plants must die and enrich the dirt with nutrients. People or the wind must drop seeds. Bees must pollinate. Plant-endangering predators must be chased away by birds or gardeners with brooms. The solar system must be enlisted to provide light and trees to offer shade. Water must fall or be plumbed and sprinkled by human hands. And if those hands travel from Ecuador to join hands in Moraga or from Lafayette to celebrate a harvest in Nicaragua, why, there can be no more marvelous globe-spanning happening than a dirt patch's transformation into a food-producing Eden.

On a pine-shrouded slope, just west of the Campolindo High School parking lot and within a home run ball off the baseball field, the Global Student Embassy is making its mark with an organic garden.

Guided by GSE Director of Program Development and Lafayette native Mallory Bressler, one-quarter acre of unused scrub land recently produced 50 pounds of beets and onions which were donated to the Contra Costa Food Bank. But Bressler didn't do it alone. Approximately 60 students had a hand in planting the garden's beets, onions,

zucchini, yellow squash, kale, watermelon, radishes and fruit trees. And three Campo science teachers, Patrick Wildermuth, Ren•Gillibert and Tren Kauzer, were early backers (and dirt diggers/fence builders).

"When I first approached the administration in June of 2012, they were transitioning to a new principal and I sensed they didn't have time for an international program," Bressler said, during a July work session in the garden.

GSE's international year-round youth leadership and foreign exchange program, founded in 2008 by Lucas and Jasper Oshun in Sebastopol, Calif., addresses critical environmental issues while cultivating relationships between students in northern California, Nicaragua and Ecuador.

Service-learning projects revolve around preserving marine biology, environmental restorations, developing sustainable communities, and similar objectives. Local program leaders engage student groups in year-round projects - leading them to think critically, but also enabling them to find and actualize their own solutions to regional and global challenges. International exchange experiences encourage students to operate from a broader perspective; summoning cross-cultural skills, refining multi-lingual capabilities and expanding students' world vision.

It's an ambitious program, even for a school not in transition, but fortunately, Bressler was patient. After Campo's science teachers invited her back for further discussion in September, the project gained the support of new principal John Walker and took off.

The school's Lorax Environmental Club jumped on board, local businesses and families contributed, and Eagle Scout projects from past years provided irrigation, tools, even a storage shed. In addition to establishing the garden, students and teachers from Campolindo, Miramonte, Acalanes, and Los Lomas high schools participated in exchange travel that brought foreign students to Lamorinda for home-stays and sent local youths to work in Nicaragua.

"I've always been fascinated with how people can live with total strangers when they share a goal," said Sarah Firth, a 2013 Campo graduate headed to Boston University to study international relations and linguistics. As co-president of the Spanish Club, Firth's interest in languages has long fed her desire to travel. Witnessing how other cultures relate to their environment was revelatory. "They treat the earth better. There's no waste because they needed their garden to feed their families."

Bressler said food access is not something kids at Campo are usually talking about. "They saw the second poorest country in the Western hemisphere," she said. "In Nicaragua, nobody cares how cool your shoes are."

Silvana Molceanu, 17, gained confidence and discovered purpose in Nicaragua. "I learned what I'm good at and what I can contribute," she said, as she put the finishing touches on a mural for the garden. "My art enhanced the visual aspect of the garden, even with the limited materials we had and the language barriers I experienced."

Bressler said the students gained respect for hard manual labor, although most of them felt their immersion in a foreign country "was like going back in time." But that doesn't mean they believe America is more advanced, she cautioned. Instead, she and the students working in the garden suggested Americans are "the most negligent about using resources" and need to "catch up with the resourcefulness of developing worlds."

Last year's travel fee was \$2,200 all inclusive of airfare, meals, lodging, ground transportation and travel

insurance. Work days in the Campo gardens happen every Thursday from 3 to 5 p.m. and Bressler said everyone in the community is welcome to participate. A special, open-to-all event with Whole Foods is planned for late August or early September.

For more information about GSE, visit [www.globalstudentembassy.org](http://www.globalstudentembassy.org).

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