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“From the Ground Up”—and on fire escapes, too



STORY AND PHOTOS BY
KAREN BOSSICK

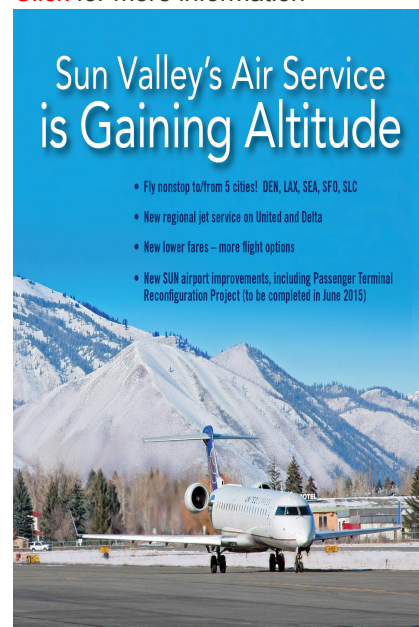
When Jeanne Nolan traded life on the North Shore of Chicago for a less materialistic existence on a communal farm, she had no idea that people would one day be calling her a “change maker.”

It sure didn’t seem likely on the day she returned to her parents’ suburban home—a single mom disillusioned with communal

life and with few marketable skills.

Her mother suggested she plant a vegetable garden in their yard. And soon Nolan found herself

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planting organic gardens throughout Chicago.

She planted gardens on restaurant rooftops and fire escapes. She planted them in school yards and she planted them on abandoned lots in low-income neighborhoods where drug traffickers hung out.

She planted a garden to supply the employee café of a pharmaceutical firm with 1,200 employees with fresh produce.

She planted Edible Gardens, a 5,000-square-foot organic vegetable farm for children at Chicago's Lincoln Park Zoo.

And she wrote a book, "From the Ground Up," describing how she came to understand the benefits of organic gardening and offering tips to help others grow their own organic food.

"Jeanne Nolan's story is not only about how seeds blossom, but about how our own lives can blossom in the most unanticipated and beautiful ways," wrote Bill Shore, founder of Share Our Strength. "Although I've been thinking about the importance of food my entire professional life, her captivating book has helped me think about it and its role in our lives in an entirely new way--one that gives me hope we may someday solve problems of hunger and scarcity."

Naomi Goldberg and Scott Runkel's 8th graders at the Community School recently brought Nolan to Sun Valley to help them identify ways they could become "change makers," providing Wood River Valley residents with healthier food with fewer harmful impacts on the environment.

Nurture Idaho founder Kathryn Guylay brought Nolan to their attention, having worked with Nolan when Nolan helped raise money for Nurture Illinois' Grow Your Own Food program. Nolan also taught Nurture's low-income participants how to grow their own food with the tomato cages, pots, organic soil and seeds that Nurture provided.

"I think of Jeanne as the Alice Waters of the Midwest," Guylay said, referring to the Berkeley, Calif., chef who fueled the interest in eating organic, locally grown cuisine. "She truly loves what she does and her love of edible gardening shines through with every word she speaks. She also has a gift for making edible gardens

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absolutely beautiful and inspiring.”

Nolan told students that she first became conscious of organic food when she saw a sign in an Arizona health food store advertising that its produce had been grown organically.

“I asked, ‘What does that mean?’ And I was incredulous when I found out— ‘You mean the food I’ve been eating is covered with chemicals!?’ ” she recalled.

Nolan spent the next 17 years working on organic farms in Asheville, N.C., Austin, Texas and in California.

Food makes up 47 percent of the carbon footprint of the average household, Nolan said. Energy constitutes 24 percent and travel, 27 percent.

Grain-fed meats are the most carbon-intensive food that we eat, she added. But those who grow their own vegetables eat less meat. And all those green plants they grow sequester carbon out of the environment.

“You guys are the change makers,” she said. “You’re the people who have the ability to effect change, and you’re going to have to effect the environment.”

Nolan said her Organic Gardener company takes care of a hundred gardens around Chicago. The gardens have provided therapy for those with mental health issues, rehabilitation for those in jail and fresh food for homeless shelters and low-income neighborhoods that are considered food deserts.

Four thousands school kids get their hands dirty each year at the zoo farm as they help to raise food for Chicago’s Green City Market. Chicago PTOs have conducted fundraisers to build school gardens, even making one garden handicapped accessible by building a path of bricks etched with donors’ names.

The gardens have cut the crime rate in the low-income neighborhoods where they are planted.

“We’re even creating gardens in people’s front yards,” Nolan said. “It gets people outside and talking over the fence.”

The grow-your-own-food movement is gaining momentum because mothers are realizing that kids eat more vegetables if the kids help grow the vegetables. Gardening also helps kids connect to nature, Nolan said.

The poster for the 'Lights in the Garden' event at Sawtooth Botanical Garden features a blue header with the garden's logo and tagline 'Celebrating Plants ~ Inspiring People'. The main title 'Lights in the Garden' is in a large, stylized font. Below it, the event dates 'Fridays and Saturdays December 12, 13, 19, 20 & 27, 2014' and times '5:30pm - 8:30pm' are listed. Ticket prices are '\$5.00 per person or \$15.00 per car'. A description of the event mentions '70,000 lights including themed displays, warm fires, hot chocolate, fresh cookies and more!'. It also notes an 'Opening night cocktail party at the Garden Friday, Dec. 12 at 5:30pm'. The bottom of the poster includes the website 'SBGarden.org' and the phone number '208.726.9358'. A photograph on the right side shows a person sitting in a garden at night, surrounded by colorful lights. At the very bottom, there is a small footer with the text '14-12-10 15B Sawtooth Botanical.indd 1' and a timestamp '12/5/2014 12:38:04 PM'.

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“A good way to be a change maker is to live as close to your values as possible,” she said. “A lot of little things can effect change.”

Student Mayanna Llewelyn was impressed: “We need more healing hands to caress the land. And Jeanne’s is one of those healing hands.”

PHOTOS: Jeanne Nolan, founder of The Organic Gardener Ltd., says that she learned she could make a difference in the world by turning her back on mainstream society.

Alice Waters, the Berkeley, Calif., restaurateur who pioneered the organic, locally-grown California cuisine, wrote the foreword for Jeanne Nolan’s book, “From the Ground Up.”

Jeff and Kathryn Guylay have a demonstration greenhouse in the backyard of their new Ketchum home.

Kathryn Guylay helped stoke the Community School eighth-graders curiosity about food when she founded Nurture Idaho three years ago to provide food education to Blaine County students and low-income families.

