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Sally Cunningham

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My title is Extension Educator in Erie County. I've been here something like ten years. I had such a gradual entry into Extension, it's hard to say when I started working formally. I first came as a Master Gardener volunteer. Then

INTERVIEWED BY

Jeremy Sporong

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suddenly, the commercial horticulture educator was desperate to do something with this floundering Master Gardener program of twelve people and said, "Please, do what you can with it." I came in twelve hours a week, then fifteen, then eighteen, then twenty-one. It was slow progress until, finally, about three years ago, the board figured out how to fund half a position for me. So my job is half within the budget; we raise the other half of the funds through our programs. It's not what you call job security, but nevertheless we go on. Horticulture is really a valuable component, so it will be here as long as Extension is here.

My program is Consumer and Community Horticulture. Half of what I do is achieved through this huge Master Gardener program. The other half is where I consider myself to be a direct educator, where I myself am teaching, doing media or other direct relationship work with my public. I balance it that way because the management of the Master Gardener program can be so all-consuming that if I let it, I would be missing a range of other opportunities. How my work actually blends



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into individual consumer, consumer groups or community groups is a big mish-mash. The difference between “community” and “consumer” is a fuzzy line, and I don’t tend to differentiate the two.

In my work, I tend to think in terms of long-term and short-term development. I’m doing a lot of work with people who become my long-term development targets—people like Master Gardeners who come in unable to speak to a group, but have great enthusiasm. Two or three years later, or sometimes even ten years later, they become the main experts who go out and lecture on compost. So many of our audience relationships, whether it is the Master Gardener or the public audience, are people who grow right under our noses and have a long relationship here. My short-term targets, especially because I do a lot of highly visible media, are like seeding acres of fields—some seeds take and some don’t, but there are a lot of things that do grow. I repeat weekly TV and newspaper coverage, and I’ve found it has a lot of cumulative impact.

An important point about Master Gardener volunteers is that key word, “volunteers.” That key word helps to get it in people’s head what the Master Gardener program is all about. It is not just a gardening course. This title should be a copyrighted, linking the volunteers to the land-grant program across the country. The Master Gardener volunteers, with an education based in the land-grant colleges, ours being Cornell, are those who want to learn scientifically-based horticulture that they in turn will share to their public. They are the outreach and extensions of myself and Extension. They are extensions of Extension.

There are 1,700 or so Master Gardeners in New York State and about 125 of them are mine. We give about sixty hours of training and a big exam. Once they have completed the training, they are then required to give fifty hours of volunteer service for two years. After that, they have to keep up a certain level of volunteer work to stay active. I have people who have been active since 1980 who still do from fifty to one hundred plus hours a year. For many, it is a way of life, or as I tell my volunteers in training, it’s a lifestyle change. Volunteering becomes the thing they do in retirement and the thing they do on weekends. It’s a passion. It’s not just busy work. So they become community garden leaders, teachers, speakers, expert soil pH testers, question answerers at fairs and events, and so many more

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things. In my county, Erie County, there are probably forty different projects that Master Gardeners actively pursue.

I backed into Extension through a part-time job. At the same time, I was pursuing my own horticulture education. I had become a garden writer and published garden books through Rodale Press. While I was part-time at Extension, I was actively growing as a horticulture expert and, eventually, a published expert. Well, so-called expert. Nobody is an expert; we're all

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For me, my passion for horticulture and gardening are rooted in my childhood with Grandpa who walked me in the woods, made me like snakes and taught me about living things in the soil. So I got the magic from Grandpa. It wasn't until many years later, coming back after years in New York City as a career person that I had a chance to work with the magic. Not until then did I finally have land and a garden where I could pursue organic gardening. The organic choices are very important to me. At age thirty-seven, after several careers and having redefined myself several times I had an epiphany and said, "A-ha, not sure what the job is, but this is the medium I want to work in for the rest of my life."

I grew up in Eden, which is here in western New York, south of Buffalo. Eden had a nice rural school. I always felt like a misfit because I was an overachiever, extremely intense, a little rebellious, but getting great grades. I was eager to sprout wings and fly away as soon as I could. The key word for me, that which I value and what I think makes me go, is resourcefulness. Resourcefulness, as I found out when I began with Extension, is one of the best features of an Extension educator. I always felt like I wanted adventure in the life process and did not necessarily want to be defined as something; like I never wanted to be a lawyer when I grew up. I just wanted to experience.

I started college at Alfred University. I took the junior year in Spain. When I came back, I went to SUNY Buffalo where I finished and got my Master's degree in humanities. I loved that junior year in Madrid. I learned Spanish, and I'm still fluent, and it still comes up in my life. I occasionally use it with various populations, more in New York City than Buffalo, but some here too. When you live in another culture, you gain a perspective that's a strengthening quality. I would recommend it for anyone. You will never look closed-mindedly at things again. You will always know there are whole other ways of being. Lots of people operate as if their little provincial single method is all there is, and that's what makes people so judgmental

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and righteous. It leads to some real problems.

After college, I went to New York City to be an actress. I hiked around doing auditions in the theater district and eventually, so as not to be poor while waiting for great breaks, got some jobs in government. Eventually, I decided I didn't want to be a starving actress and live with that many cockroaches. So I said, "I'll get a respectable job and use my brain instead of my acting talent." I worked as a management intern for the GSA, the General Services Administration, which was a really competitive, cool opportunity for young budding executives of the future. Then the '74 energy crisis broke, and it was a mess in government. A new law had been legislated, and we had to interpret it and get petroleum distributed to people lining up in trucks outside the Federal Trade Center. It was an amazing opportunity for a young, energetic person who wasn't bogged down by the way things were always done. When I look back, I think I was probably unbearably enthusiastic and sure of myself. I would tell a GS-15 how we should do it. It was probably just awful for them to have this young whippersnapper, and a couple others like me, try to take over. But that's what it took in a time of chaos. Some people thrive and rise to the occasion and others scratch their head and say "What the heck should we do next?" I wasn't cowed by tradition and went forward and said, "Let's divide up the petroleum cases this way and that way." And by golly, I ended up with a career built out of seizing the moment.

I had several years in the federal government in New York City. I was quickly raised from a GS-9 to 12 to 13. I ended up with a fast career track based on grabbing that opportunity and just using my native brain rather than anything that I was ever taught at a college. Once in a while you get those chances in life. It's probably like going in the Peace Corps or something where you have to make it up as you go along. At some point, my career choice was to either grow by moving to Washington D.C. or to stay at my highest level in New York City. I didn't want to move. So I said, "Nope, I'm going to market myself new."

A pattern in my life has been, when in doubt, go to the library and study-up on how to do something. So I went to the library and studied how to change career tracks. In the process, I read a great book called *Executive Jobs Unlimited*. It was a life-changing book for me. I did everything it said. I learned how you sell what you've done in one field, articulate it in quantifiable terms, and market yourself to some other business. I wrote 300 broadcast letters targeting for specific industries and ended up with four tangible career offers at a \$30,000 level. It was just amazing. I was just going cold into some new field. It was all marketing. In a way I still use things like that with people I know who are out of jobs and facing hard times. I can't imagine how they can think that they aren't marketable anymore just because

their business closed. So I often use my own personal story to demonstrate.

I jumped to insurance where they hired me as a fresh new go-getter. It was really sales, but they called it an account executive. I would make phone calls, open doors and create association programs. Sounds boring, but it wasn't. Instead of a bunch of individual needs, I would see common needs and would then group the needs together and say, "Let's form an association for this kind of insurance." I became the first woman vice president in marine insurance in that part of the insurance industry in lower New York. I worked as a broker with Marsh and McLennan and a couple of other firms and ended up with a specialty in seafood imports insurance. In summary, I would say that I just saw an opportunity to create a new insurance program and got ahead through resourcefulness.

I had several good years in insurance, but then there was an economic downturn. At some point, I went from an executive job in the World Trade Center—I think I was on the 102nd floor, in the most elegant and expensive place in the world—to a president with tears in his eyes, who fired me, saying, "Oh, I really hate to do this." My program, which had suddenly taken a downturn, had lost a lot of money, so it, along with many others, was cut. I went from a great situation to being cut. That experience was a breakthrough in individual growth for me. I've always believed that if I landed in Kansas City with two cents in my pocket, I could rebuild myself and make a new life. But this was the first time that I really had to do it—to go from a lot of security to zero security. I had high rent to pay to keep a Manhattan apartment. I had to prove that I could keep it together all by myself. So that was like reinforcing confidence in independence and resourcefulness. It was an important self moment.

To give myself a break, I went to International Bartenders School and got a fun, interesting bartender job in the Broadway district. I guess I chose bartending because I've always respected real-world working people who honestly earn a living with some sweat. I never felt you always had to live your life in a suit. I just said it was time for me to earn my living in a really direct way and go home without a lot of pressure. You know, you go home, you wash your hands, you wash your uniform, and you start over again.

I played bartender for a while, then I knew it was time to shift. I'm also an okay piano player, so after bartender school I said, "I'm going to get the first piano or bartender job I can get on Third Avenue." I started on Third Avenue in New York City at 95th street, walking downtown, and I went into every bar I saw. If they had a piano I said, "I'm looking for a job; would you like to hear me play?" If they didn't have a piano, I said, "Looking for a bartender job; how 'bout it?" I think it was 59th Street, at Fortune Gardens, a big Chinese restaurant with a lounge, where

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I was hired. It took me 34 blocks to get hired. It was another one of those cases where I think, “My goodness, the things we dare to do when we are young.” I don’t want anybody to think I’m that great; it’s just that I had the “moxy,” which is a New York word. I had the guts to try for it.

It was nice to have cash in my pocket and not a lot of pressure, but I worked hard. The people interaction was great, though. So it was good for that time. I was young and fresh-faced enough that the bar customers flirted a lot. But on the other hand, sometimes they treated me like a mother, even though I was way too young for them. People who are drunk enough just forget who you are. They just really need a shoulder and a listener. People are lonely everywhere. You have the same thing on the Garden hotline. People call here and our Master Gardeners end up practically counseling until they can move them along. People sometimes just want someone to talk to them. In bartending, the medium was the drink; in this case, the medium is the gardening. People just need connection.

At some point in here the adventures changed because I spent 12 years in Manhattan and for various reasons (I won’t tell the romances side of the story) I moved to Brooklyn for a job on the other side of the river. Then I got a real estate job in Brooklyn for a little while. That’s when I met my future husband. I was mugged. He was the neighborhood association president, and after I was mugged, I called up and said “This is just terrible. How are we going to patrol this neighborhood?” That is when I met this very nice man who became my husband.

Together, we wanted to move to rural America. We both had the dream of some land and some animals and maybe a family. We both wanted out from New York City at the same time. Crack cocaine had hit the streets of New York in about 1984 so sharply, and everybody was mugged. It was just the final straw. And so, it was time to come to where the quality of life was different, sometimes not as rich, but definitely more comfortable. We moved here. I had a child. And suddenly I was in a place where I could have my own organic garden and animals. So I dug into horticulture. It was a long trip, and it’s not at all an obvious one, except to me.

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If I had to tell just one practice story of what I do, I'd start with last summer's project with teenage youth in Buffalo. My job last summer was educating and helping the youth create gardens. In collaboration with the city of Buffalo, this program had eighty kids and five supervisors. We created sixteen new gardens over a seven-week period. It was a major achievement in terms of garden production, design and planting. The teaching went on continuously and I felt that I was doing the epitome of Extension, the epitome of education at all levels. I'd be teaching kids at one moment, real direct: "This is where the tree roots are, and this is why we don't step on them, and here's how we protect them by this stuff called mulch." And as they were putting down mulch, they were learning about tree roots. This was at the youth level.

On another level, I was teaching the Master Gardeners who were volunteering to work with these youth. I wasn't just teaching them the subject, but teaching them how you talk to youth, how you talk to people of different ethnic backgrounds, and how you listen to what they are asking first, because it isn't what you always assume. So developing the abilities of the volunteers as they interact was another component.

Then there was the education of the supervisors who were really there to count the hours. But they were getting hooked in, and for the first time they were gardening. Some of them took it home to their own lives. We were reaching to this community group who had wanted the project and would become the owners of it. For the first time, they were participating in developing this garden that they would go on with. So they too were getting the education and catching on to having ownership. It was education at multiple levels every minute of the sweaty, hot days. It was just super. At the end of it, we had real gardens to show.

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Yesterday, I had a meeting with Youth Opportunities (YO), the youth organization that we worked with last

summer. Last year, they gave us some funding. This year, I've learned that there is almost no funding, but they'd like us to do it again anyway. A reality in Extension is that we have to find out how to develop funding and not just go out and work for someone else for free. I'm thinking creatively about how we can follow-up and keep

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going back to the community groups and the gardens we started. We can follow up, advise, recommend. We can show weeding, show what are perennials coming back, show remulching and review the watering systems. We are going to go back, but we're not going to gain a lot of funding out of it. So on one hand, I'm looking back fondly at last year's real cool thing and how not to let it slip away because the funding is different. On the other hand, I'm looking for the next opportunity. If the city Youth Opportunity program can't do it, maybe the county parks can take us on. Maybe there is another youth component where we can do some of the same great things, but in a different direction.

So that is one way we are trying to not lose momentum—by doing great work and not letting economic times throw us off from worthwhile missions. You don't want the money to drive the ship. You know it can happen sometimes. I don't want to take a grant to do something just because we can get the money for it. I want to keep it mission relevant, where real learning and real growth occur.

So that is Part I of my practice story. Part II is where I've created basic gardening classes in different parks in Buffalo, where the Master Gardeners and I teach. Again, some of these Master Gardeners are teaching their first class and some of them have been doing this for twenty years. Some of them are going into parts of the city they never went to before. So there are a lot of different adventures going on. The first project, on the East side of Buffalo, in one of the more impoverished, socio-economically deprived neighborhoods, was in a big building that functions as a senior center called "Friends to the Elderly." I had invited community leaders and community garden group leaders. They were mostly elderly ladies who are powerhouses in their neighborhoods. Not knowing who would come, I had the Master Gardeners and myself all ready to do a two-hour class. We got there at one o'clock, ready to go, and one person was there. So disheartening. But then, two and then three people, and then a bus came from another section of town with one of those little powerful ladies bringing six people. Then came another van with another little frail-looking powerhouse who brought another four people. We ended up with twenty people and a wonderful class.

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The talk was about soil and compost. Real breakthroughs were occurring. One of them was a young woman, an employee of Friends to the Elderly, who was sent by her boss. Her boss said, "You got to learn how to take care of the flowers around this building." She was thinking, "What a pain." But as we taught, light was breaking through. Her first question, after people had been talking about raised beds, was, "I'll be the stupid one, so what is a raised bed anyway?" So the Master Gardeners

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realized, hah, we hadn't gotten it across. And they went back a little. After that, she said, "Oh I could do that!" She said, "Last year I went out in my backyard. I wanted to grow some flowers. I started poking with a stick and a shovel, and I said forget this, I don't know what I'm doing, and I went back in the house

and never did anything. But this year," she said, "That's what I have to do? I can do that." Suddenly she knew how to make compost and how to build up a raised bed. She could get some boards and so forth, and all of a sudden she was excited. She's got the job pruning the shrubs around that place, so now she's motivated. She was one breakthrough.

There was another young man sitting there who was also sort of shuffled off to this class because he was hanging out to drive the bus or something. He sat there, and it was like dawn breaking through. I was talking about picking up other people's leaves and using your kitchen scraps, like coffee grounds and fruits and vegetables, to make compost. This young man said, "Now wait a minute, let me get this. You take the garbage? You put it in the dirt? And then it's this?" We passed around the soil. "It turns into this?" he said, "You've got to be kidding me." Wonderful! It was just like he was in wonderment.

So there was a light dawning. When you have those moments, you know it's real teaching, that they're getting something. This young man and the others even asked, "Why doesn't everybody do this? Why do we throw our leaves in the dump?" And I said, "Yeah, that's it. You've got it. We need to teach everybody don't we? So let's get all the neighborhood leaves into these piles in your neighborhood and in the community lots, and let's do this." We talked about the problems of urban composting, and people who are afraid it will bring rats, and what you do to prevent that. So we got into the real nitty gritty breakthroughs on larger societal issues. It was wonderful!

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how these things work in their own communities. It's getting them to think about systems. I personally don't like the word "capacity building" because to me it's just the newest catch phrase when other times different administrators laid upon us new definitions of what we did here in Extension. To me, what we've been doing all along is truly what education is supposed to be: *educara*, to lead. We are leading people into real learning, real thinking. Once you start them on that path, there is no end to what people can do in solving problems for themselves. It's how to think about problems, how to ask the questions and follow a concept through to the end. It's very exciting when you have these moments. The Master Gardeners are wonderful. Some are just learning how to do some of this. But even if they are sitting in and I have a breakthrough moment with someone, another time they will even be quicker to hear this opportunity in another student, and they will be better at it.

The Extension office in Erie County is on a campus with the Arts & Crafts Movement. One of the movement's leaders is Elbert Hubbard, the great community leader and thinker. He had engraved on one of the Roycroft Inn doors across the street a saying that is real important to me. It says, "Produce great people, the rest follows." That's what we're doing. We are helping to produce great people and the rest follows, whether it's that young man who got a breakthrough or somebody else.

In my educational approach, I like watching my students catch on to natural systems and how they work. They begin to understand that you can never do just one thing, like kill a bug, because this thing has to do with the next prey it was eating. In the same sense, whether it is our societal systems or in nature's systems, your impact on a child or your impact on a butterfly all has to do with a larger connection. In showing people the connections you are doing a lot of the real education. Like that example with the guy saying that you don't have to put your leaves on your street in the garbage dump. You can get them back into the soil. Well, he just hadn't ever seen such a close system as Mother Nature had worked out between the soil and the tree leaves. So there was that kind of learning moment.

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Another part of my work is about organic gardening. Teaching about beneficial insects in the home garden is my best talk. It's not just that I want to teach people to be kind and not kill insects because of the inherent importance of the insects. That's true, yes. But I think we can get people to have a little reverence and wonder at all the things these insects are doing and how many of them are out there cooperating in what you want to achieve. If we can get people to be a little bit respectful of such a simple living thing that translates upward into a huge need in our society. We have people in cities, and even children in the suburbs, sitting behind computers who have never walked in the woods, never climbed a tree, never smelled the soil or lay down in a field.

So I care particularly about the organic message in terms of teaching people a respect for life and a reverence for the awe of nature and its systems. I also teach the idea that we aren't all in charge here. We're not all controlling everything. You don't have to go out and buy a product to kill a bug just because you saw it. Rather, the more you understand about how it all works, the less you need to do that controlling thing. I really do think our society needs more people to think like that

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instead of those who see an ant in the house and go infect everybody by spraying two cans of Raid. I definitely think people need help because they've lost touch with what our grandparents knew about nature. They knew that there are natural systems going on around us, and it's not the end of the world if a spider got in the living room. So I do have a strong sense of the mission of the content. The gardening medium is a great way to teach people other values and skills.

I'm often asked how I walk the line between my personal passion about organic gardening and working for Cornell, which certainly still teaches some chemical controls and accepts pesticides as a part of the program. For me, it was a conflict at first. When I first came here as a volunteer, I felt very, very unaccepted as an organic gardener. They were condescending and kind of skeptical. That was a long time ago though, in the late '80s. Now I find that Cornell's integrated pest-management (IPM) is the norm. Today, society and Cornell have both looked toward the most environmentally friendly alternatives to managing all sorts of problems. Now both public wishes and scientific awareness

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have become quite compatible with our environmental goals.

So I don't feel like I'm fighting the pesticide lobby. Rather, I feel if everyone did integrated pest management we wouldn't be in such a pickle. I can give my organic preferences and explain what those methods and alternatives would be and, at the same time, understand that at times somebody is going to choose a pesticide or herbicide to solve a big golf course problem. So I am comfortable with representing IPM even though I personally remain organic. I can help people with making those choices.

You can't alienate people. I know a lot of fiery environmentalists who go the alternative routes and lose the people rather than win them. All too often, they polarize the issue. I often find I can lead people more gently into the issue. For example, because of my books, I'll be asked to give a keynote address in other states or other counties around New York. I'll go out on my own time and talk to audiences of 250 and sell my books on the side, which supplements my piddly Extension income. When I do, I get lots of garden club people in the audience who all grew up when you sprayed chemicals for any given problem. I try to teach them a more humorous, warm and anecdotal side to the issue. I try to get across that these are the beneficial insects. There is sex and violence in my talk as they see how these insects and others work. I keep it humorous, but my goal is that they go out saying, "Wow, I didn't know there were so many good insects. I'm going to look for that one." I also encourage them to write down every new insect they see and go look it up and see if they can figure out what it's doing. So I get a lot of regular people who open their mind to that. So here, it is insects as the medium.

I wish I had an assistant to assign to every project, but it isn't like that. And of course, with volunteers, you don't get to fire them, and you don't even totally get to select them 100 per cent. You take volunteers, and so it's sometimes hit and miss, and sometimes a challenging kind of management.

The Master Gardeners, for example, are from every walk of life, every educational level, and have quite a variety of resources they bring. The ideal manager of Master Gardeners all over the state are those managers who can change the communication mode to suit the person and be very flexible about management style. Flexibility in our jobs is absolutely essential.

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There are many times where if I can have a good Master Gardener who has reached an achievement level in something then I'm very happy to back off and encourage that person to run with it, to be the expert and be the leader. I look for times when the volunteer is developed and ready to go by him or herself, and I'm glad to back away. But a lot of times I teach. I'd really miss it if I were totally replaced by my volunteers. I like the teaching so I certainly *do* teach. In the case of the pruning, I share the teaching with my co-educator, Karen Hall, who is our

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commercial horticulture educator. In this case, we both teach pruning, using great Cornell material.

When we go out to teach people how to cut back these old apple trees, I may walk out with six people whom I've also invited. I'll invite someone from city forestry, a commercial greenhouse person, a commercial nurseryman or two, and a master forester who have all said they would be glad to help us. I may do some of the show and tell,

but I've asked other experts in the field also to be teachers and leaders. It crosses all kinds of political-government lines. The value of a few years in networking is essential to success here. Networking is really important, and it's the reason why nobody can just step into another educator's job. It takes a long time to really know who you can call upon and depend upon as partners in getting the job done. So I do a lot of development of the other leaders, but I also still do plenty of the individual leading. Back at the shop, I write newspaper articles, edit the monthly magazine and prepare the weekly TV spot to market our work and get the people to all of these events.

I think the most challenging part for me is not saying yes and not getting overwhelmed. Honestly, the biggest challenge is managing me. I have to keep my own energy up and keep myself motivated. I couldn't do this if I didn't absolutely believe in it and love it. It's much more work than the job I'm paid for. I could do a quarter of it and get away with a perfectly acceptable job, and I'm not alone in this. I know there are lots of Extension people who give hugely, just out of pure enthusiasm, momentum and belief that this is really good work to do and important. So my first job is managing me, keeping myself motivated, not letting myself get defeated by either the pure volume of all the things we could do or by administrative-economic threats, including the uncertainties in Extension in general or the need to

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go get funding. I can't let myself get wrecked by those or else I won't be effective.

What's hardest is deciding when to say no to the individual who catches me because they see me on TV and wants me to teach them how to garden in the next two hours, which I can't stop to do. Then I say, "Well, this Master Gardener can probably help you and send you some good material." So you have to decide which teaching moments you really should grab because they are priceless and won't happen again and which are the people who are just being lazy and could go read this book or learn for themselves, but instead just want to make you work. It's challenging to differentiate between worthwhile teaching moments and just being used as a source of information. That's a hard selection sometimes.

I'm often surprised by the wonderfulness of the Master Gardener volunteers. I interview them and think I have a feel for which ones are going to be the stars of the coming few years.

We only take a new class every four years or so, so I'm often just amazed by the emerging butterflies. I'm also disappointed once in a while by volunteers who can't come through. But most of the time, I'm surprised by how you just can't know what's in people until you work with them. And some of them just come through with so much more than you'd ever think. It's very heartening to watch Master Gardeners. If you ever lack faith in humanity, hang out with some Master Gardeners. It's the truth, because they usually do bring the best. It may have something to do with the nature of horticulture as our medium. You know, the nature of gardeners in general is just a fairly positive bunch of people. They believe in spring, always look to the future, tend to have patience, to think in processes and systems, and understand it takes investment in A, B, and C before you get to M, N, and O. Master Gardeners do *re-inspire* me fairly often.

There are some Master Gardeners who are great examples of just emerging and flying with it and becoming entities unto themselves. They become known as speakers, leaders and teachers. Some Master Gardeners have become true friends and my best pals. One group of friends and I created a whole fall garden fair event that's right after Labor Day. It's a whole day of lecturers, speakers and outdoor events, and that came right out of friendships with other gardeners. There was one Master Gardener, a nurseryman in a family business. He was a very good tree man, and his wife said, "Oh you'll never get him to talk in front of people." Now he goes out and does "Getting Your Shrubs Ready for Winter." He shows his snow fence, shrub

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protection, things that he has built, and is one of the best teachers of that subject in the area.

We had one, Rochelle Smith, who was a Master Gardener here and had a small interest in professional landscaping. She was working at the time, and I don't know what she was doing, but she became a leading Master Gardener and then one of the area's best known speakers on tree and turf care. Now she is developing a community college horticultural school where she is taking an important role in developing commercial employees. I can't say the Master Gardeners program takes credit for her, but we certainly influenced her. Part of her growth was certainly through everything she had learned from Extension. This was a practice place for other life and career skills. The Master Gardener program is that. It's a practicing place; a safe, developmental environment. By the way, that's what 4-H is at the youth level: a safe environment in which to develop skills.

The most rewarding aspect of my work is some of the individual emergences that surprise and please me. In these instances, people do more than I ever could have thought or solved things for me that I didn't even know to ask for. The second most rewarding aspect is what occurs in our monthly Master Gardener meetings. We'll have six projects that need Master Gardeners to do something, and the project leaders or organizations will come in and ask if we can do this. I try to select the projects; I won't say yes to everything. But I'll say, "Let me see if there are interested volunteers." So at these meetings, I ask, "Would anybody like to do this, or can anybody help with Buffalo in Bloom, our public square planting day?" I'll get eight hands! It's just wonderful to ask, "Could anybody help with . . .," and they're volunteering. And they come through. The third most rewarding aspect are those great learning moments. When you see the light bulb and the "a-ha" in the eyes of anybody, at any level, any walk of life. That's just so satisfying. Every teacher wants those.

Horticulture has a huge impact in community development. Let's say you have a down-trodden, crime-ridden block with some empty lots. As soon as people come out and start building a garden in that lot and meeting on a regular basis, a change begins to occur. When people start coming out on the street, it brings out the best in some other people who can be attracted by that positive community energy. It also starts to make the area safer. It starts to be more attractive to a buyer of the empty house. Horticulture has a huge community rebuilding effect.

We've seen that in a big way through Buffalo in Bloom. I've been on the board from the beginning of this Buffalo garden contest called "Buffalo in Bloom." It was designed so smartly. We promoted it through the city water bill so that every homeowner got an invitation to put in an application for their front yard to win a prize.

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Every district, every neighborhood, no matter how rich or poor, or what kind of income or housing, had a chance to participate. Every neighborhood is in a different district so each district had a chance to be in the competition. Even in the first year, there were 500 or 600 residential applicants saying “My front yard should be judged.” After training the judges, we send out 200 plus judges to look at every single garden and write them up and rate them. Often the homeowners interact with the judges and talk to them, with the judges always saying positive things no matter what. We’ve even seen plastic flowers, so we have to say positive things like, “Your color choices are wonderful.” But we really, really have seen amazing front yard gardens in Buffalo. That chance wouldn’t have been there without this potential to be judged and win a prize. What happens is you get one garden on a street and then, next year, there are three gardens on that same street. It has had a wonderful value.

The mayor is so pleased with it in Buffalo. We get lots of press. It’s quite a process to get the applicants out there, publicize it, get the judges trained, sort all this out, and have a ceremony in September. During the ceremony, we’ll fill the auditorium with 400 people who are there for their awards and their neighbor’s awards. We have prizes and judging for community gardens and institutions as well, like in front of the hospital or a library. We even have the “Best Blooming Bar” contest where they’ll put hanging baskets in front of the town bars. The biggest part is the residential awards though. It’s been a very big success, and it’s pointed to as a tourist attraction. It’s a real estate value, and the community spirit, neighborhood self-esteem, and those things have just been marvelous. That’s the best of gardening, when it’s much more than planting flowers.

Sometimes I have felt that the success of my efforts are in spite of the Extension system—not having nearly enough resources, not nearly enough administrative support, and all the while struggling for county money. They certainly try to support us; it’s just not always there. I do feel tremendously excited by the slow build from twelve Master Gardeners in 1991 to 125 active ones today. I was determined when I came in here to become visible and use my acting ability and my public speaking background to build the program up. I wanted to use my background to reach the media here. I really had that personal goal, to be known on Buffalo TV, and by golly I am. Strangers stop me constantly and say, “Oh, you’re the TV garden lady! You told me about this!” or “I know to cut back the roses when the forsythias bloom,” or “I don’t kill spiders anymore.” They’ll tell me in the grocery store, “I feel guilty if I kill a spider; that Sally Cunningham told me not to.” I get this all the time. It’s nice and so rewarding. A couple of times, I was out of my Sunday morning slot, unexplained, and I got anonymous phone calls, “Are you all

right, dearie? We missed you on TV this morning. We watch you every Sunday.” I feel watched out for you know? A little TV goes a long way.

A former Cornell Cooperative Extension administrator seemed to be against educators using media. It seemed to go out of vogue because his interpretation was that it was just Martha Stewart stuff, light and fluffy. But I don’t find that at all. I have a whole public out there who has seen me every Sunday morning for five years now, and those people know where the tree roots are, why you don’t park your car

I think the content is the vehicle. It’s what we get known for. It’s why people come to us ... but when they do, they also get the larger life principles: learning how to learn, how to think, how to research, how to solve problems for themselves.

under the tree, and why you mulch around the base of the tree, but not up the trunk. They are getting a lot of principles about these things. They learn what you can do for wildlife, such as leaving a dead tree standing in the forest. They also learn to recycle the Christmas tree in the yard for the birds. There’s a whole public who has heard tons of this now and really, I know, even though it’s like scattering seeds to the wind, lots of them take. It takes repetition to get people to learn things. I’m constantly repeating. They’re getting

the concept and the facts over and over. I think that’s a real valuable use of the media, even though it has come in and out of vogue for Extension people. Sometimes the media is the right way and sometimes it’s the long class where they take in-depth learning over a period of time.

This is an amazing position to be in. It really is good. If Extension folded tomorrow, I could go on and be an Extension educator anyway because I’ve finally gotten to be known. I could get the industry to pay for me, or something like that. But Extension is the right vehicle if we can keep it alive and well. It gives a lot of us in different fields the chance to affect people’s lives.

I heard some discussion about how Extension educators aren’t going to be the experts anymore in their content areas, but I don’t agree with that. I think the content is the vehicle. It’s what we get known for. It’s why people come to us, whether it’s the greenhouse expert or the dairy agent or the nutrition person or the gardening lady. They’re going to come to us for the content, but when they do, they also get the larger life principles: learning how to learn, how to think, how to research, how to solve problems for themselves. They get a lot more than the quick answers in all of our content areas, but we still need the gardening as the lure to get

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them in the door. They're not going to come to a meeting on "How to be a Better Citizen." Nobody would come to meetings on that. But they come to a "Gardening in your Community" class, and pretty soon they're interacting with people they wouldn't have talked to before. So it's a great medium.

I've seen relationships being built amongst the community through gardening. I've seen the wealthier people coming to horticulture school where some of them have said, "I don't know how to, but I would like to volunteer in my community. Do you know what I could do?" Pretty soon, I've got them going to the state park cutting back the garlic mustard or pruning trees in Delaware Park. There are a lot of times that they've connected to other people in the classes. Just yesterday, in this Eastside class, we had some very conservative church ladies who had probably never had a real conversation with an openly gay man. But there was a gay man there who wanted to work in one of their neighborhood gardens. So this little lady had a hat and a veil on, no less, and he's going to go work in her garden. People do get together over it.

There are a lot of conversations we're having about whether traditional classroom learning works or not. There is an emphasis that you've got to go out and be among the people. Well, you do, but you've also got to get them organized, because telling them one at a time isn't quite enough. I really have to get them to come to their church, community center or meeting place. We are going out to where the people are, but I'm still getting them into a classroom. It's not to lecture at them. It's good teaching, that's all. Yammering at people doesn't work anymore, and we all know that. But on the other hand, if you're the one who knows, and you have lots to teach, you just have to make the most of those moments.

What gives me the most satisfaction is when a project has a life of its own and doesn't need me anymore. It's just great when that happens, and it often does. I don't even need to look back because I know certain things go on that have become a volunteer's way of life, hobby, and passion—to maintain, to meet and bring in the rest of the neighborhood. That's very satisfying.

Gardening is a great medium to improve the quality of life for individuals and communities, which is a whole lot like the Extension mission. There is nothing like gardening for giving people something they can achieve themselves with no or minimal money. It encourages cooperation, enhances understandings of interactions at all levels from plant-people interaction to all other forms of life. It teaches personal skills that range from personal awareness to science concepts to patience to the phenomenon of cause and effect, meaning that the things you do have positive or negative results. So I really think that horticulture isn't just another subject

matter. I think it's the big one. It's a huge medium for larger societal and individual growth.

The nature analogies do help people to get it. I do a sort of dramatic thing in one of my talks where I'll be speaking about "What's the big deal about these insects" and then I'll suddenly slam a book on the floor and screech "YEEEE, I killed it!" Then I'll say, "Now what's wrong with that? Isn't there something wrong if we can just kill something we haven't named? We don't know what it's doing. We don't know what it had to do with us at all. Do we want a lot of kids growing up who can do that? You know, what else do they kill? What other larger creature is the next target? Is it your little kid on the playground they push aside?" I think this is really, truly important. At the simple kindness of humanity level, it's about being a respectful living being.

We're going to get more crowded around here, and we better be able to ask, "Gee, what kind of person is that? What is he doing?" Not judging, saying, "I gotta shoot him." It's really a scary world we're entering, and I believe that respect for diversity is directly linked to how you feel about some creature you never met before. You decide it's "creepy crawly" just because it's unfamiliar. It really starts there.

I often say that bartending and waitressing are the best training for the skills that any manager needs for prioritizing and tolerating pressures coming at you. They both require quick responses on many levels happening all at the same time. A good waitress, in a busy luncheon, has multiple pressures.

This one needs a check, this one needs a soup, I've got to make the ice tea, they want their beer, I've gotta make small talk with this guy who's trying to flirt with me, somebody else is being rude. You've got all that going on at the same time. This is perfect training for an Extension educator or an executive at any level. When I've had anxiety dreams in my life, I'd dream of waitressing, which I did during graduate school. So you know those life things are good job training.

The waitress, on the other hand, has the satisfaction of simple requests and simple solutions. The pressures and the multiple demands, that part is part of any

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job. But the difference with us is that we also have to go to the deeper implications. We have to ask what's this person learning from us. We are also trying to make sure they have the skills to ask for the soup in a nicer way tomorrow, to make better choices of soup, and we are showing them how to get the soup themselves or even how to grow it, cook it and make better ingredient choices. So yes, we want much more depth. No simple solutions in Extension.

I hope my next project will be to develop more volunteers who aren't Master Gardeners. We can't necessarily develop more Master Gardeners due to our limited staffing and resources, but there are so many adults out there who want direction and want to contribute. So when we educate, I'm looking for all the ways this person will have one more opportunity to pass it on. This way, volunteers can become the new state park volunteers. I'm doing lots of that, trying to maximize each moment and seize opportunities for larger value.

We are good at pulling people together, empowering them with knowledge, and then assigning them to a good goal.

Another project I'm currently working on is serving as liaison between the state park director and community volunteers. It could be Master Gardeners who are helping out or it could be other community entities working with this brand new park that's like a blank slate. This park could have garden tourism, it could have nature trails, it could have gardens with all the recommended perennials for drought landscape, or it could have a trail of the best native trees and shrubs of western New York. All of these things could be some of the best uses of this park. We're going to start out teaching pruning, and we are going there to have people practice pruning on the overgrown grape vines, apple trees and old huge lilacs. This is a big estate. So we are doing classes at Extension and may end up with fifty or eighty people going over there. They may connect to this park and become permanent volunteers of the park. We're helping to develop them and connect and maximize the opportunities for this park. We are good at pulling people together, empowering them with knowledge, and then assigning them to a good goal.

I'm also involved in the "Great American Clean Up" and the "Keep Western New York Beautiful" component of "Keep America Beautiful." Again, those are people with the motivation to take all kinds of volunteer groups. There is some funding that will support any kind of clean up. I'm aiming a lot of that effort at the cleaning up of the invasive plants in this park because that's clean up too. Hopefully, we're going to have one hundred or more volunteers at the end of May pulling

out garlic mustard. We may even be able to involve the school kids. So that's another project that has wings.

I'm in my mid-fifties, so I'm quite a few years from retirement. I'm certainly going to go on a long time. I will write more garden books. I've always been a writer of some sort. I've done lots of personal writing, so I may write fiction sometime (and it won't all be fiction). But for now, I write garden books and put some of my personal values and beliefs into them. When I'm not working for Extension anymore, I'll continue to write, do media and public speaking on subjects I'm personally developing in.

I'm starting to do more in the area of natural resources. I think a really, really important horticulture topic is the invasive plants issues and how to get people aware of two things: fighting invasives and protecting natural habitat, even emulating natural habitat, in their backyards. I'm more and more invested in that direction. My choices of educational programming will be influenced by the ways I grow. What I'll tend to teach and focus on will evolve too. On my own time, I'm studying ecosystems and forest biology because I think we're losing all the habitat; we have to do something. Sometimes that which we teach a suburbanite, for instance, what to cut down and not cut down, what to plant and not plant, does make a difference collectively. So I'd like to clone myself and a few others and multiply the efforts and get this out.

