



INNOVATORS

Learning From the **Land**

Heidi Witmer '02, the founder of LEAF Project, brings together diverse groups of teenagers to learn about nutrition, cooking, and farming—and the values of hard work, entrepreneurship, and sustainable living. **BY ANNE STEIN**

As summer internships go, working for the LEAF Project in rural south central Pennsylvania is as far from an office job as a teenager could get. Four days a week, from mid-June through mid-August, a crew of 14-to-18-year-olds spends a full day on farm and food-related tasks that take them from fields to kitchens, and from classrooms to markets.

The 24 students from school districts around nearby Carlisle, Pa., range from at-risk youth to young leaders to those in between. The goal, says founder and

executive director **Heidi Witmer '02,** is to connect them to each other and the land, and in the process develop leadership skills, self-confidence, and

a deeper knowledge of how the world operates, all within the context of food and agriculture.

One day a week the group visits one of the six farms that partner with LEAF (which stands for Leadership, Education, and Farming). Among them is a large-scale vegetable operation that employs migrant workers. “They work alongside the migrant crew on a task like harvesting grape tomatoes, and sometimes there’s no common language,”

PHOTOS: PATRICK MONTERO

says Witmer, 37. “The goal is for them to understand the scale of our food system and the realities of the work.” Other days are spent milking cows, making cheese, and learning about raw vs. pasteurized milk. Interns also seed, weed, harvest, and package produce on the four-acre LEAF farm, which supplies produce to eight local restaurants. Each week one of the chefs creates a family-style meal and teaches the interns basic culinary skills. In the afternoon, LEAF interns take over a Salvation Army soup kitchen and make and serve that same meal to 150 people. Interns have also run canning workshops in nursing homes and cooking classes at nearby preschools.

In the fall and spring, youth leaders who have gone through the internship program have the opportunity to work with LEAF to hone their business skills. One group came up with LEAF kits, a box of two meals prepared by summer interns—using produce from the LEAF farm and partner farms—that they sell to local families. “They learned that time and convenience is what prevents many people, rich and poor, from eating better, so they designed these kits,” Witmer explains. “We’re hearing from people that it’s helping marriages and families, and in the process, the youth are running a great venture and getting thanked for it.”

And it’s a life-changing experience for them. “I just see food differently than I did at the beginning of the season,” says Gavin Anderberg, a LEAF intern. “I see farmers differently. I just see the world in a different light.”

Witmer, who grew up on a huge family farm shared by her father and his nine siblings in York County, Pa., has always found strength and wisdom digging in the dirt. At Haverford, the religion major worked with former grounds supervisor Eric Larson planting edible landscaping such as Swiss chard and herbs inside ornamental gardens on campus. “He loved intermixing vegetables and horticultural plants,”

she says. “I learned so much from him.” After her junior year, Witmer traveled to the capital of Rwanda on a United Nations project through a summer internship with the Center for Peace and Global Citizenship. Each evening she worked in the public gardens in different Kigali neighborhoods and discovered the power of agriculture to rebuild community.

After graduation, Witmer ran an adventure therapy program for youth, then became a math teacher, horticultural therapist, and eventually an administrator at a high school for emotionally disturbed girls in Harrisburg, Pa. “It was frustrating to see what happened to kids over their summer break,” Witmer says. “They’d

first intern crew, and since then Witmer has partnered with local restaurants and a network of for-profit farms, making LEAF one of the few programs in the country that connects a diverse group of kids to the U.S. food system. She has slowly grown the program, going from 12 interns in a six-week summer program to 24 participants, who now work during the spring, summer, and fall seasons. In 2016, Witmer moved the LEAF Project from an incubator farm to its own home farm and built an on-site certified kitchen.

“Just two percent of people are directly involved in agriculture in the U.S., and often our young people have no connection at all to it,” says Witmer. “I wanted to encourage this incredible



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Since LEAF’s founding in 2013, 186 youth interns have:

- Prepared and served farm-fresh meals to 1,800 people at a local soup kitchen
- Raised 4,000 servings of seasonal vegetables for preschools
- Raised and donated 2,500 servings of produce to local food pantries

Bringing their LEAF learning home:

- 88 percent of LEAF interns increased the number of home-cooked meals eaten together with their families
- 90 percent of LEAF intern family members increased their produce consumption

do nothing. So I encouraged them to volunteer or get jobs, but they were experiencing a lot of job rejections. Then they’d return to school in the fall, depressed, disengaged, and less capable.” She looked around for models of summer engagement and found the Food Project, in Boston. “I loved it. It was based on the belief that youth are an untapped resource, rather than something to be fixed or controlled, and they believed in intentional diversity, mixing up crews of urban and suburban youth.”

Witmer started working on developing the LEAF Project in 2011. It took two years to establish and recruit the

resource of young people to become engaged with the food system and use it as a way to understand their unique strengths and interests.”

And the interns reap the rewards of their harvest. In addition to a stipend, they bring home \$10 worth of produce each week and are assigned to cook with it. For accountability, interns use their smart phones to send selfies with the food they have made to LEAF staff. “It’s fun to watch their skills and confidence grow, as well as the smiles in the pictures,” Witmer says.

Author’s bio?