



SOUTH DAKOTA ROOTS SHINE BRIGHT AT BALI GREEN SCHOOL

By Kurt Lawton



Leslie Medema



Jeff Thompson, SDSA Second VP and uncle of Leslie Medema

While Bali, Indonesia, may conjure visions of a vacation paradise, it's also home to the globally renowned Green School Bali with South Dakota rural connections.

Sioux Falls native and head of the Green School Bali's International curriculum, Leslie Medema, credits her youth with her mom's rural South Dakota family and both of her grandfathers' personal histories of entrepreneurial pioneerism. That beacon launched her affinity with a rural community, education, and an interest in the history of Vietnam and Southeast Asia.

As the niece of Jeff Thompson, a farmer from Colton and South Dakota Soybean Association Second VP, Medema fell in love with the land and the rural community during many weekend and summer visits to the Thompson farm in Lyons and the Hainje farm in Dell Rapids.

"In many ways, it was my time spent on the farm doing projects and sharing in the farming community that really developed my core identity of what I love," she says. "It was such a nice family feel, where family is bigger than your immediate family. Family is the community."

AN AGRICULTURAL CONNECTION

When Medema returned to the Thompson farm for a visit in April, discussion with her uncle Jeff turned to soybeans, prompted by his shirt that read, 'Will randomly start talking about soybeans.'

"It made me laugh yet wonder if South Dakota soybeans make it to Indonesia because we eat soybeans daily in Bali," Medema says. She learned that her daily soybean consumption in the form of delicious protein-rich tempeh (traditional Indonesian fermented whole soybean food cake) could be coming from South Dakota.

Indonesia, the fourth highest population in the world across 17,000 islands with the largest economy in Southeast Asia, has purchased U.S. soybeans since the 1980s. Thanks to the soybean checkoff funding the U.S. Soybean Export Council (USSEC) efforts, Indonesia has become a top-five export market. High consumption of traditional soy foods (tempeh and tofu) makes Indonesia the largest food-use soybean importer of 2.5 to 2.6 million metric tons (MMT) annually. In addition, its livestock and fishery sector expansion among Indonesia provinces continues to grow soybean meal import from the U.S., with sales of 5.5 MMT.

The discussion also made Medema ponder the common U.S. disconnect between city and rural, as her Sioux Falls friends live near soybeans yet lack a basic understanding of local farms, crops, and livestock. It is the opposite in Bali, as the Green School teachings tie directly to community sustainability and nature immersion connected to real-world projects and applications.

MEANINGFUL, PRACTICAL CURRICULUM

Medema is now in her 12th year at Green School, Bali leading curriculum development and implementation across their growing number of schools. Bali school is a blend of almost 500 international and local children who learn in a much different, more practical way than U.S. school curricula, where teaching to tests judges education.

"What's unique is that students in each grade absorb basic learnings then walk outside their wall-less bamboo structure classrooms to apply this knowledge immediately on experiential projects across a 28-acre campus of rolling gardens and a river. And every project impacts the local community in a renewable and sustainable way," Medema says.

For example, each K-12 class has a garden or animal to care for—tending to the whole process from seeds and babies to harvesting vegetables and meat, even learning how to cook meals. They learn alongside local farmers and gardeners, achieving both success and failure. There is also a rice, coconut and native forestry curriculum to understand every aspect from growing through different product uses.

Students have built functioning bamboo bridges across the river. They created the largest biofuel powered bus system on Bali, formulating the fuel from used cooking oil and developing business and entrepreneurial skills by managing the six-bus company. In addition, students partnered with a solar company to take their campus off the grid. And the Green School also created a recycling company as part of a learning program.

"My goal is for every child to have a joyful and meaningful experience at school. We provide a place where they can explore their passion and develop a mindset of how they want to give in service to the world and their community," she adds. "In many ways, we're instilling that sense of community where mentors, adults and teachers focus on the youth and a brighter future. It's much like what enhanced the learnings of my youth through community in rural South Dakota."

For more details on this award-winning school of the future, search for Green School Bali and visit their YouTube page @greenschoolbali.

 [youtube.com/greenschoolbali](https://www.youtube.com/greenschoolbali)