

radish awards: community

Intelligent design

Sustainable Living Coalition draws from nature's wisdom

By Linda Egenes

It started in 2004 when a few people in Fairfield, Iowa, were looking for a sponsor for an environmental conference.

"We decided to form our own nonprofit and called it the Sustainable Living Coalition," says Diana Krystofiak, a founding board member of the SLC. "The goal was to combine people from different sectors to create a more sustainable Fairfield, which could then become a model for other communities."

From the start, a driving force behind the SLC's vision and educational initiatives was Lonnie Gamble, who with permaculture expert Grover Stock, began teaching a 10-week permaculture course called Big Green Summer. Hundreds of interns trained with Gamble and Stock and lived in Gamble's home. But Gamble and his wife, Valerie, couldn't donate their time, money and home to educate interns indefinitely. A campus was needed.

Fast forward to the fall of 2009. The newly inaugurated SLC campus stands on the north edge of Fairfield.

"We bought the land in 2006 with a grant from Iowa's Great Places," says Briggs Shore, the SLC's administrative coordinator.

The purpose of the campus, she explains, is to become a working permaculture farm and educational center with classes and internships.

"Permaculture is a way to take the principles of intelligent design, found in nature, and apply it to absolutely everything in your life — how you get your food, water, shelter, heat (and) power, and (how you) dispose of waste," says Shore.

"We want this to be a model, to establish best practices for natural building and rural farming that people can take back to their own communities," says Frank Cicela. At age 40, Cicela brings a wealth of experience to the SLC, having established a similar nonprofit called Sustainable Indiana, and shows remarkable dedication by taking an unpaid leave from his job at Clipper Wind Power in Cedar Rapids to spend every other week working for the SLC.

Shore points to the 1,200-square-foot straw-bale, post-and-beam barn that is the main classroom and administrative space for the campus (pictured). The building is functional but awaiting funds for plastering the outer walls, covering the gravel floor with flagstone and completing a five-room dormitory loft. It was erected in just four months with the help of an Amish construction crew for the foundation and dozens of volunteers, who worked innumerable hours.

"We're completely off the grid, and we provide our own power and water," says Shore. She points to the rain catchment system, 10 photovoltaic solar panels and one-kilowatt wind turbine that supply electricity and high-speed Internet. "We're high-tech while being sustainable, rustic while still being modern."

The SLC benefits from its collaboration with other groups. For one thing, the campus adjoins and makes use of two other sustainable sites for its workshops:



With the help of volunteers, the Sustainable Living Coalition in Fairfield, Iowa, built this straw-bale and post-and-beam barn for use as a classroom. (Submitted)

the Abundance Eco Village and the Mullenneaux extended-family acreage, which includes three sustainable cob, straw and clay homes. Other collaborators include Grinnell College and Maharishi University of Management.

Future projects include building four-season dormitory space to house 50 interns, a hospitality center, an E Iderhostel, underground cisterns to store drinking water from the rain catchment system, wetland waste management system, permaculture food forest, edible landscaping, and seed money to extend educational offerings.

But ambitious as these plans are, Gamble sees a more visionary goal. "The SLC is a way to foster ecological micro-enterprises," he says. As an example, the SLC bought equipment and loaned it to help a local baker get started, and launched the Edible Cityscapes Project.

Another project in the works: a micro-enterprise center to help fund sustainable businesses. And the SLC is providing land and sponsorship to a John Jeavons mini-farm center, one of three in the U.S. to be established this spring.

Read a longer version of this story online at radishmagazine.com.

For more information about the SLC, contact Briggs Shore at briggshore@gmail.com or visit sustainablelivingcoalition.org.