

CONVERSATIONS

Tony Recasner: A School in a Garden – Edible Schoolyard New Orleans

by Jane Roy Brown for COGdesign

Dr. Tony Recasner, a psychologist, is president of First Line: Education for Life, a non-profit organization that opened the first charter school in New Orleans, in 1999. In fall 2006, Dr. Recasner and First Line helped launch Edible Schoolyard New Orleans (ESY NOLA), based on the original Edible Schoolyard in Berkeley, Calif., founded 11 years ago by chef Alice Waters and the Chez Panisse Foundation. The first sanctioned replication of the Berkeley program, ESY NOLA maintains an organic vegetable garden on the campus of Samuel J. Green Charter School (grades K–8), which integrates organic gardening and fresh, seasonal cooking into its curriculum, culture, and food programs. Students participate in all aspects of gardening and in preparing, serving, and eating the food they grow. According to the program’s mission statement, these activities serve as “a means of awakening their senses and encouraging awareness and appreciation of the transformative values of nourishment, community, and stewardship of the land.”



Tell me about the neighborhood where Edible Schoolyard New Orleans is located.

The Green Charter School is in an urban neighborhood in the Uptown area of New Orleans. Our 460 students come from all over the city. Ninety-eight percent of the kids are African-American and 95 percent qualify for federal free or reduced meals.

How does ESY NOLA differ from the original program in Berkeley?



Elementary school children at Green Charter School all have tasks in the garden and learn science, math, and good citizenship as they work. Photos courtesy Edible Schoolyard New Orleans.

In addition to the fact that we’re in a more urban environment, and New Orleans has its own food culture, a major difference is that we have a K-8 school. The Berkeley program is in a middle school. We’re able to introduce kids to gardening, cooking, and eating differently before they’ve developed strong likes and dislikes. We also have more programming flexibility, because we’re not yet preparing kids for high school or for state testing, so we can integrate the garden into every subject. Finally, because we were rebuilding the Green School after Katrina and planting the garden at the same time,

the garden didn't come *after* the school. So we really see ourselves as a school in the middle of a garden.

You mentioned rebuilding the Green Charter School. Was it damaged in the storm?

The storm completely destroyed our first charter school, the New Orleans Charter Middle School. Green is our second charter school, and we had to reconstruct the first floor after it flooded in the storm. At the same time, we embarked on this project with Alice, so we did soil remediation along with that. At first we were growing things in planters. Once the ground soil was clean enough to plant in, we created the garden with the help of a local landscape architect who had trained at University of California, Berkeley.

How is Alice Waters involved?

Alice has made herself a part of our school community and given us the freedom to be our own program, understanding that the core principles could be the same. Our first school offered an elective in gardening, so we had a tendency in this direction. That led us to Alice through a mutual connection, Randy Fertel, of the Fertel Foundation and the Ruth's Chris Steakhouse chain. He visited our first school and noticed our interest in gardening, and that inspired him to introduce me to Alice. After I met her and understood what she was aspiring to, Alice came here to meet with staff and talk about the possibility of creating this partnership.



Dr. Recasner and students welcome Edible Schoolyard founder Alice Waters. Ms. Waters dedicated her 2008 book, *Edible Schoolyard: A Universal Idea*, to Tony Recasner and the Edible Schoolyard at the Green Charter School in New Orleans.

How much time does each child spend in the garden each week, and what do they do there?

It varies by grade and depends on what the kids are studying. We not only plan units around teaching in the garden, we also bring aspects of it into the classroom, so they're experiencing the garden even when they're not in it. That said, every student spends enough time in it to experience its growth and evolution. We believe kids learn better hands-on, not just conceptually. In biology you can teach photosynthesis and the life cycle of plants. The kids use math to measure water and fertilizer, plant growth, and crop yield. They witness cause and effect. They learn how to rotate crops and so many



Every child finds intriguing activities in the garden. Dr. Recasner credits the garden with encouraging positive behavior, instilling hopefulness, and building a strong work ethic within students.

other neat things that urban kids don't usually get to learn, yet the school still achieves the state's academic requirements.

Have any kids ever *not* enjoyed working in the garden?

No. Every kid finds something of interest there. In urban environments, kids are starved for different experiences. Gardening is so unfamiliar that the kids are just intrigued by it. And it is such a therapeutic endeavor. It's had a very calming and nurturing effect on them as they recover from the psychological trauma of Katrina.

Would ESY NOLA work in a non-charter public school?

I don't think so. You really need autonomy from a centralized district when you are putting in irrigation, developing funding relationships, and so on, which require decision making at the site and, sometimes, additional private funding. Charter schools are still publicly funded and accountable, but they are supported by a separate task force that raises money for the things you can't do within the normal operating budget of a public school. Our eventual goal is to be less reliant on these complementary sources of revenue and to fold our whole program into the public school budget.

Does the garden provide food for school lunches?

The garden isn't large enough to feed the whole school—it's about a third of an acre—but we are able to put some vegetables on the table at lunch, and we also buy from a local farmer's market. That's how the kids see what the garden yields and understand where their food comes from. All the kids also get to eat something from the garden during their classes.

How do you measure the program's results, and where are you in terms of achieving them?



Gardening students are proud of their harvest and the results of their shared labors. Working in the garden has helped children recover from the trauma of Katrina.

We've met with people at the Tulane University School of Public Health to come up with measurements for our program. Meanwhile, we observe changes in eating behavior and in attitudes about food. For example, we notice what the kids like and don't like in the cafeteria, and that they ask for junk food less often than they did when they started coming here. At snack time they no longer make faces when we hand out granola bars instead of candy bars. Another result, in terms of general behavior, is that we're producing kids who are more global citizens, and later they will bring a different dynamic to the high school environment.

Was it difficult to muster local community and/or financial support for the program?

No. Local support is very strong, and we've been very successful in raising money. The community owns the school, the parents are full participants, and we feel we're the stewards of it.

Does ESY NOLA benefit the wider community?

Yes. We're building a culture that reflects our values and philosophies. We're introducing kids to choices in lifestyle and helping them understand their food sources. This is a disadvantaged community, and the kids and their families really embrace it. Mothers are curious about the health benefits of fresh food and different ways of cooking, but they may not have been in an environment where they've had a chance to explore that. Now they regularly cook with the kids on campus, and we have open garden days. Parents work in the garden, and they eat things they wouldn't otherwise have tried, prepared in ways that are not as familiar to them. In many respects the parents are more eager to try these things than kids. We've tried to study this, but we've learned that we have to build the program before we can study it.

Are you a gardener?

I was not and I am not a gardener. But as a psychologist, I wanted to create the kind of school environment that would lead to positive behavior, and to instill a sense of optimism and hopefulness, and a strong work ethic. I wanted to develop skills that kids need to be successful, to encourage positive relationships among students and teachers. The Edible Schoolyard methodology has been very helpful in all of this. I've also seen that the beautiful aesthetic aspect of the garden has such a calming affect—it's as though the school tries to be like the garden.



About Jane Roy Brown



Photo by Bill Regan.

Jane is a writer, editor, and landscape historian. Her writing has appeared in the *Boston Globe*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Garden Design*, *Landscape Architecture*, and other publications. She works part-time as the director of educational outreach for the Library of American Landscape History. Jane received a 2008 Gold Award from the Society of American Travel Writers Foundation. Jane lives in western Massachusetts with her husband, photographer Bill Regan.